



WINGS  
OF  
STARLESS  
NIGHT

BOOK ONE OF THE KINGSDAUGHTER SERIES  
SADIE STERLING





**WINGS  
OF  
STARLESS  
NIGHT**

**SADIE STERLING**

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*To getting back up.*

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# One

I WAS FALLING, and it seemed to last an eternity.

High above the clouds, the summer sun warmed my skin and the loud rush of wind filled my ears. Even as I hurtled headfirst towards the ground, each breath I took was calm, controlled. I had long learned to ignore the queasy sensation in my gut that urged me to scream.

*Twenty heartbeats left.*

Loose hair whipping about my face and stinging my cheeks, I fought to keep my arms locked in place at my sides, thinking only of my descent—that's the bliss of falling. Everything in you is fighting to stay alive, and all else is irrelevant. From far out I was nothing—a nameless speck marring the vast sky.

*Fifteen heartbeats.*

The only problem with falling is that it ends. It *always* ends.

*One heartbeat.*

I opened my eyes to discover I was fast approaching a swath of tall, gnarled trees. In the same breath, I unfurled my wings and spread them wide. They caught air and I angled my body so that instead of crashing into the treetops, I glided over the forest, fingertips skimming emerald leaves.

Grinning, I revelled at the speed. The trees below me blurred as I flew faster, pretending that I could fly as far as my wings could take me—that I could spend forever in the sky.

Green stretched as far as the horizon, the ancient Sorcen forest breathing in the perpetually warm air and exhaling with a rustle of leaves. Birds chirped and took flight from their nests in a defensive flurry as I passed them. Briefly, a butterfly joined me as I slowed and sank lower—its green wings so much like my own.

A bright spot caught my eye in the distance—the glint of a river's reflection, or the glistening wings of a songswan—but

for one, heart-stopping moment I thought it was the Sun Palace, even though I knew I was too far away—that here, I was *free*.

My calm crumbled, and uneasiness returned to settle like a weight in my limbs.

No matter how far I flew, or how high, I always had to return. The sun had begun to sink in the sky anyway; the guards would be searching for me before long. I hovered in the air for a few more wing-beats, committing the strong, twisted trees, the blissful, blue sky, the infinity of the horizon, *everything*, to memory before flying back to the Skybrush Mountains.

As I neared my destination, I flew slower, the dread consuming me amplified by every wing-beat. My uncle had been strict lately—to the point where I wasn't even allowed to wander the halls on my own. And I had flagrantly defied his orders, yet again. He would probably double my guard, and prohibit any further trips outside the palace, even to Suntrul, the thriving village that wound through the trees where the Sun Palace made its home.

With a sigh, I banished any regret and chose to enjoy my final excursion outside the palace. It was easy to see more restrictions were coming, regardless of my latest show of irresponsibility. Day by day, my once-endless freedom was being torn from me. Having one last flight was worth the consequences.

The Skybrush Mountains loomed in the distance, their craggy, gray peaks reminding me of what little I had to return to—empty, echoing hallways and my uncle's dour frown of disapproval. A shadow passed over me, blocking the sun and mirroring my darkening mood. I dismissed it as a stray cloud before a shrill screech ripped through the air. On instinct, I twisted to my right, but not before something clawed me, one of its razor-sharp talons aiming to pierce me through. Luckily, it caught my hair instead of the weak flesh of my back, but I still yelped in pain when it tore a handful of blonde strands from my scalp.



Heart pounding erratically, I almost froze in the air when I saw that the predator hunting me was a kyvre, as impossible as it was. For the briefest moment, I thought I was hallucinating, but then it banked, spreading its wings wide and splitting the air with a killing screech before charging at me again.

Rarely, kyvres would cross over into Sorcen. They were Liral-born, corrupted by the very air of the wicked, dark court where an evil king reigned. The protection of Aurricc, our patron god, kept them at bay, along with all the other monstrosities skulking around Liral. At least, that's what my uncle had always preached.

And he hadn't been wrong. No one from Sorcen had seen one in five hundred years. Not until *me*.

Twisting through the air, I fumbled open the sheath at my hip and drew my dagger. At the speed I was going, I'd hurt myself if I tried to fly down through the thick treetops to seek refuge on the forest floor, and if I slowed down to try, I was as good as dead.

From the few history books I had bothered to read, I had known that kyvres were feathered like hawks, with the same keen eyesight and deadly talons. I had also known that those talons grew longer than my arm, and their crimson wingspans reached twenty feet across, but I hadn't truly *understood* the scale of the beast.

As a mouse was to a hawk, I was to the kyvre.

No wonder it thought I was easy prey.

I had to fight the kyvre if I didn't want to be its next meal. And if I didn't kill it, who knew what destruction it could cause as it hunted new prey. The beast was faster than me, but I was smaller, more agile. If I could get underneath it, I could stab it.

The kyvre closed in, its powerful wings beating right behind me as it continued the hunt. Diving suddenly, I looped around so that I took the advantageous position above and behind. With another screech, it arced towards me, but it was too slow. I rushed forward and landed on the great expanse of its back,

plunging my knife into its flesh with a deep strike.

Letting out a loud cry, it bucked and tried to throw me off. I held on tight, one hand gripping my dagger hilt, the other digging into its feathers. After one, rough shake, my dagger slipped out and the feathers anchoring me ripped free. I grasped for another hold, but the kvyre was too quick, evading my searching fingers.

Wheeling around, it opened its beak so wide I could see rows of short, sharpened teeth lining the inside of its maw. With a powerful screech, it dove right at me—or rather, where it thought I was.

It lunged to slash my illusion. At the same time, I flew upwards, in between its striking claws, and dug my dagger into its chest with the full momentum of my flight. It screamed in pain and confusion as its claws hit thin air and my illusion disappeared. I grabbed a fistful of feathers with one hand, and with the other I slammed my dagger into the soft spot behind its wide sternum, again and again.

Slashing at me with sharp claws, the kvyre continued screeching its rage. One of its talons hit, dragging along the side of my thigh. Screaming in pain, I contorted myself closer until it couldn't reach me. Every time my dagger hit, its screeches became more pitiful than fierce, until, finally, its wings started to flap sluggishly. I dropped, clearing its claws, and it didn't bother to chase me, instead flying towards the tree canopy and searching for a place to land.

Thick, blue blood covered my arms, from my fingertips to my elbows. I wiped my hands clean on my russet dress and rested in the air for a moment, catching my breath before following the kvyre. It smashed through the dense treetops, snapping thick branches and clearing a path to the ground. I landed a fair distance away, just in case it had more fight remaining in its strong claws.

Even as it lay in my sight, chest expanding with shallow breaths and laboured whines leaking from its beak, I could hardly believe that I was seeing a kvyre—that it had been able to find a way out of *Liral*.

The truce between Liral and Sorcen had been standing for tens of thousands of years, and, as far as I knew, very few fae from either court had set foot in the other for just as long. Liral lay beyond the Crossover, an invisible border woven by Aurricc with the most powerful magic ever practiced. Only the ruler of Sorcen and a select few knew where the Crossover began.

Those who searched for Liral without this knowledge never found it. Some never even returned.

The kyvre was a Liral beast, borne of evil, shunned by Aurricc, but if I left it alone, its death wouldn't be quick. It could suffer for days. Maybe another predator would follow the scent of fresh blood and its life would end in agony.

I was only protecting myself, but I had fatally injured the creature, and I should be the one to give it mercy. Hunting trips with my uncle had taught me that much, no matter how much it made my stomach turn. Swallowing my guilt, I steeled my grip on the dagger and slowly approached the beast.

Eyes wide open, it searched the clearing madly. Weak, desperate whimpers escaped its beak, making me cringe. Slumped on its side, wings askew, it twitched as blood gushed from my stab wounds. Circling wide, I approached it from behind.

Sensing me as I got closer, its whines grew louder before it let out a gurgling screech. With my dagger in hand, I reached over its neck, and, bringing the blade back towards me, opened its throat in one sure slice. Blood gushed from the wound and I watched as the kyvre stilled, taking a moment to mourn the death of the beast that could have ended my life. Once I was sure it was no longer breathing, I took to the skies again.

Blood dripped from a shallow cut on my thigh, running down the ivory skin of my leg as I flew towards the Skybrush Mountains again. The cut began to sting, but I knew it hadn't gone too deep, or else I would be bleeding out beside the kyvre. I would still need to be healed, though, which would only serve to heighten my uncle's suspicion.

I settled on a boulder overlooking the rapid flow of the

Sorcsl River, breathing deep to try and calm myself before returning to the palace. Flowing from a spring that bubbled up high in the Skybrush Mountains, the Sorcsl River was safe, the banks solid rock with no trees or greenery in sight until halfway down the jagged expanse. The peak was my sanctuary, the only place where I didn't have to hide from my uncle's prying ears.

After readying myself for the chill, I splashed cold water on my arms. With some hard scrubbing, the kyvre's blood washed off my skin, and what stains wouldn't wash out of my dress blended into the dark fabric. I cupped water in my palm and poured it onto my wings gently, again and again, until I had removed the blue mottling and restored them to their pristine, pale-green colour.

Besides the gash on my leg, I looked untouched, though my hands shook as I ran them through my golden hair, smoothing the wind-blown, wavy strands into something slightly more dignified.

I had almost died. I had taken a kyvre's life. I never wanted my uncle to know, but he would. He knew *everything*.

The trees did whisper, after all.



## Two

ONCE I REACHED the Sun Palace, I didn't bother to sneak around like a fugitive. I belonged there, even though the thought of encountering my uncle had my palms sweating. To my luck, the halls were eerily quiet.

With melancholy, I thought back to when they were filled with fae; when laughter and wordless chatter echoed from each corridor. It felt like years since the palace had been so alive, but it had only been a few months ago that my uncle had started frowning and imposing strict rules at every possible opportunity. Not even a servant scampered through the white quartz hallways to water my uncle's countless plants as I made my way to the infirmary.

Only soldiers, select servants, high-ranking nobles, and the royal family were allowed anywhere near the palace anymore. No one from Suntrul, no riff-raff, no lower nobility—no one *unnecessary*, as my uncle had taken to saying. Without them, the palace was empty—a dead, shiny husk making a mockery of something that had once been so vibrantly alive.

Every passing day had me feeling hollow, too. No one smiled, except for my cousin Erelie, and her cheeriness was starting to feel more forced than sincere. At least she was trying. I had given up weeks ago.

The beating of wings and murmuring of low voices sounded around the corner. I stilled, but hadn't decided whether or not to hide when a group of ten guards with gleaming golden suns on their breastplates came flying towards me. Behind them flew King Osreth Blessedborn, my uncle.

His robes of malachite green swayed about his ankles, the golden floral embroidery flashing in the sunlight, his glossy, pale-green wings sticking out of two slashes on the back. A circlet of gold roses—his informal crown—sat on his graying brown hair. A deep, deep scowl appeared on his pallid, bearded face when he saw me, making the new wrinkles at the corners of his eyes even more pronounced.

Once he was close enough, the guards surrounding him pulled apart so he could approach me. My eyes met the floor, but when he cleared his throat I was forced to look up to his weary face.

“Allina,” he said, voice tired and gravelly, “how many times have I asked you to stay within sight of the palace?”

“Too many.” I tried to smile, but it ended up as a strange lip spasm. His disappointment didn’t lessen.

“How did you manage to get out this time?” He sighed, knowing the answer that was to come, but setting himself up for a letdown regardless.

“I flew out the front gate.” The same answer I gave every time.

Osreth narrowed his eyes in skepticism. He hadn’t reigned this long by being a fool. The trees whispered to him, and he knew I was employing my illusions to access a secret way of leaving the palace, but he also knew I would never admit to it. The path to the tallest peak of the Skybrush Mountains was my secret, and mine alone.

“It must not happen again,” he said. A clear order—one I would refuse to follow.

“Why not?” I protested. “You know I love flying. Please, if I can just—”

“Because.” He cut me off, holding up one hand and gesturing with it. “Aurricc has spoken to me. You are currently involved in a *circumstance* that you don’t understand, and I need to ensure your safety, along with that of the rest of our family.”

I was taken aback by his honesty. “You’ve never mentioned anything about this before.”

“And I won’t be mentioning it again. Our court’s survival depends on it,” he stated frankly. Again, treating me like I was still a whiny child, instead of nineteen years old.

“But, I just want to...” There was no use, I realized, and trailed off. The sternness of his expression told me I wasn’t

going to win this fight. It wasn't as if I had won any before.

“From now on, you will have two guards accompanying you at all times.” The order was nonnegotiable. “If you wish to visit Suntrul, you must inform Captain Oakthorn and he will plan accordingly. If he decides that you will not visit, *you will not visit.*”

“*Fine,*” I replied curtly, gaze meeting the floor again as I tried to not to show my anger. His irises had shifted to a glowing green, the veins branching from the corners of his eyes suffused with light—the only sign he was feeling the same.

“Good. I think that—” A pause. “You’re bleeding.”

So he had finally noticed. “I scratched myself on a branch.”

I shouldn't have lied. In a few weeks, the trees would reach him and whisper the truth into his ears anyway. But by that time Midsummer's Eve would be long past and I could afford his ire.

“Come, I'll escort you to the healers.” Without another word, he motioned for me to join him and his guards encircled us. We flew down the hallway in uncomfortable silence. There wasn't anything I could argue that wouldn't be answered with a short, angry response, so I chose to uphold the uneasiness that enveloped us.

Once we stopped in front of the infirmary, a guard opened the door for me.

“Thank you, Uncle Osreth.” I gave a quick nod and entered the infirmary, relieved to escape his suffocating presence. But when I was halfway through the door, he called out to me in a rush of breath.

“Allina, I know that...” He broke off and stared at nothing for a moment, his eyes fading to their normal hue, the glow in his veins receding. “I wish this could be different,” he said, sighing. “But it can't be.”

I blinked, astonished by the confession. He hadn't been so open in months.

He turned his gaze back to me, bright, green eyes piercing mine. My father's eyes. *My* eyes. The green of a new spring—according to Osreth, that was how my mother had always described the colour.

Forging his sadness into cold, expressionless steel, the glow of his eyes returned. “I never meant for you to feel trapped.”

“I don't feel trapped.” At least, I would never admit to it. I hadn't been able to put a name to what I had been feeling lately, and now *trapped* seemed to fit perfectly.

He gave a tight-lipped smile, but it wasn't a happy one. And then he was on his way, leaving me alone to my confused thoughts. Aurricc, Sorcen's patron god, didn't speak to Osreth often, so why now? And why would we be in danger?

If the kyvre was an indication of what was to come, the danger could be from the Liral Court. The Crossover could be weakening, and more monsters could be finding their way into Sorcen. I shivered, trying not to imagine the shadow-beasts of Liral stalking on all fours, blotting out the bright halls of the Sun Palace, scraping divots into the quartz floors with razor-sharp claws...But those were silly thoughts best suited to a child.

My uncle would keep Sorcen safe from any threat. Even though he was distant, even though he was acting strange, I trusted him to do what was best for his court, his family. I had always trusted him, and I wouldn't stop now.



THE INFIRMARY WAS empty, save for one healer with slicked-back blonde hair and orange wings. Bowing and fluttering over to me, she gasped at my wound and immediately started to fuss. The blood had dripped down my leg again and was congealing on my brown leather sandals.

Though I tried to console her by informing her the scratch looked worse than it felt, that didn't stop her from forcing me onto a cot. I lay still as she cleaned the cut with hot water. After patting my skin dry with a cloth, she placed both hands



on my thigh.

Magic flowed in a controlled trickle from her fingertips into my leg, and as the stinging pain of the cut subsided, I stared at the blank ceiling, reminiscing about the past, trying to assure myself that Osreth hadn't changed. That he was still the same, just in a difficult situation.

When I was a child, he would read me stories every night. Erelie was just a baby then, and while she was sleeping, I would get my uncle's attention all to myself. Sometimes he would recite tales from memory, of Aurricc's exploits and the heroes who founded Sorcen and fought to keep it from falling into Liral hands, and, sometimes, when I was lucky enough, he would tell me about my parents.

I always hoped it would be the latter. He was the only person I knew who would mention them to me. The only person who I could say their names to without his gaze shifting to meet the wall beside my head.

I didn't have many clear memories of my parents. My father, King Leetrin Earthshifter, had succumbed to sudden madness when I was four years old. Within an afternoon, he had abdicated the Sorcen throne, murdered the love of his life, my mother, Queen Havena Riverbound, and turned the knife on himself. My claim to the throne had been destroyed, and Osreth, my father's younger brother, had been coronated in a time of chaos.

More so than my actual parents, I had always thought of Osreth as my only parent. I knew he had Aunt Ryena and Erelie, and that I wasn't *really* his daughter, but that hadn't been enough to deter me from deciding he was the father I never really had, and that he thought I was just as much his daughter as Erelie. I had grown out of that delusion a long time ago, but a tiny, foolish part of me still hoped he considered me his own.

To me, his recent stony silence and harsh glares were a rejection of all the time we had spent together, of everything he had taught and promised me. He barely acknowledged my existence anymore. Even Ryena did her best to ignore me

more than usual. I only had Erelie. And any moment, at either of their whims, she could be gone too.

“How does that feel, Your Highness?” the healer asked, eyebrows drawn close as she delved for any more torn flesh. I flexed my thigh. No twinge of pain. No ache.

“Wonderful. Thank you.” The healer beamed at my praise. “I’ll leave shortly.”

I closed my eyes, taking the time to clear my mind. The healer retreated to her desk, grabbing a quill and opening a notebook, making a record of my visit. Her scratchy writing was louder than a ringing bell in the silence, grating my ears. Just as I decided to leave, the door slammed against the wall and I bolted upright.

“Allina!” Erelie burst through the door, her arms outstretched and her loose platinum hair bouncing in her wake. She halted beside my cot, gripping the edge with both hands and jolting it.

“Father said you were hurt!” she exclaimed. “How did it happen? Are you better? I brought your guards. They’re outside.”

Her amber eyes were wide as she took a breath and waited for my response.

“It was only a scratch,” I assured her.

“Good.” She smiled with such joy I couldn’t help but smile back. Though she had inherited her dark brown skin and innumerable freckles from my aunt, she had inherited her infectious enthusiasm from my uncle. Whenever she was this excited, she reminded me of him—of how he used to be.

“We’re going into town,” she said, taking flight and releasing my cot with a shake.

It took a few moments for me to make sense of what she had just said. “What do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes at my stunned expression. “You heard me. They’ve already started decorating for Midsummer’s Eve and I want to see. Father just said we could, so don’t worry

about him getting angry.”

Before I could comprehend Osreth’s change of heart, she was dragging me off the cot and across the room. Osreth was being reasonable, right after I had gone rogue for most of the day? Instead of dwelling on his strangeness, I dismissed my skepticism. I wouldn’t complain about having freedom.

Four guards waited outside the infirmary. Erelie blew past them without one glance, unfolding her yellow wings and taking to the air. I followed her lead, and the heavily armoured guards scrambled to keep up. Laughing, Erelie turned her head to look back at me.

When she realized that I had almost caught up to her, the laughter ended. I smirked and darted around a pillar to overtake her, but she blocked me so that my only option was to slow down or slam into a wall. I opened my wings fully and decelerated enough so that I could bring my legs up in front of me and push off the wall, giving up some ground in our race, but not as much as she was expecting.

We catapulted through the door in the ceiling, one after the other, and dove down the rounded outer wall, wings tucked in. We were neck and neck, glancing between the ground and each other as we cleared the quartz curve of the palace and launched towards the ground, flying alongside the fossilized tree trunk on which the crowning sphere of the Sun Palace rested.

Erelie clenched her jaw tight and strained her face with effort. I pulled up just a little too early, enough to make it seem like it was a mistake. Erelie got the timing right and edged me out, flying over the first guard tower moments before I did.

“Yes!” She twirled and hovered in front of me, arms thrown up in celebration. “I win!”

A wide grin stretched across her face as I rolled my eyes and pouted for show.

“Just wait until next time,” I countered. *If* there ever was a next time. The guards had finally reached us. They were all scowling, but none of them said a word. Osreth would know,

though; they would report to him the moment new guards arrived to replace them.

“Sunsdaughter!”

“Kingsdaughter!”

Scattered voices called out to us. Erelie’s wings fluttered and her eyes shone as she waved to our subjects with a sparkling smile. I followed suit, and they bowed before beginning to approach us. It had been almost a month since we had been allowed out of the palace for a visit, and a small crowd was starting to gather, sure to turn into a large one. I floated in the background and slowly made my escape, content to let Erelie deal with most of the attention.

Two guards remained on either side of her, and two others followed me as I slipped away while I still had the chance. As I made my way to the centre of Suntrul, I looped around the great trees, their three-hundred-foot-tall trunks sprouting with homes of all sizes and colours. I ducked and swerved past other fae, some recognizing me and gaping, others obliviously going about their duties.

The whole of Suntrul hummed with joy and excitement. I let it infect me, until my chest didn’t feel heavy and my head wasn’t clouded with worry over my uncle’s earlier comments. When I reached the main square, all heads turned.

“Kingsdaughter!” Lord Jylan Oakrunner, a lower duke of Suntrul, shouted to me in a wavering voice, causing the workers to bow. I acknowledged them with a nod, and they continued with their duties.

Midsummer’s Eve was tomorrow, and everyone was preparing. Pixies twined long ropes of flowers together and braided them across every surface. Though dim in the bright sun, glass lanterns shining with fae-light hovered in the air. Already, I was mesmerized by the beauty, but the final display was always an unforgettable spectacle.

All throughout the main square, tiers of stone platforms had been strung up, one above the other, with silverwood threads imbued with fae magic wound around the great trees to hold



them in place. Each platform would host plenty of sumptuous food and lavish displays of magic, all rare and extravagant, sourced from the entirety of Sorcen. And at the very top level, the bonfire and revelry would rage all night long.

Thoughts of the celebration had my lips quirking up in a smile. Midsummer's Eve was a chance to be free and lose myself to music, wine, dancing, and *other* pleasures—if I was finally brave enough, which wasn't likely. A large pile of wood was growing steadily in the centre of the square, ready to be hauled upwards, and I could already see the bonfire crackling, could smell the delicious cinnamon smoke...

The sun was well on its way to setting, casting the sky in orange and red hues. My excitement peaked as I thought about how it was almost tomorrow, almost Midsummer's Eve. I closed my eyes as I pictured the torches glowing in the darkness and the dancing bodies casting shadows in the flickering light.

I could *taste* the strawberry wine.

An old guilt arose in me then, instilled by my uncle. Before I became *too* giddy, I should respect the origins of Midsummer's Eve—its true purpose was to honour Aurricc, god of prosperity and might. Aurricc was the creator of fae, and Sorcen his favoured court. He gave us our unchallenged strength and good fortune, and we worshipped him for it.

But even if he allegedly confirmed his existence by speaking to my uncle on the rare occasion, I personally didn't hold Aurricc in very high regard. If I was one of Aurricc's favoured, he hadn't shown it very well. I'd believe in him when he brought my parents back to life.

"Kingsdaughter!" Jylan yelled for my attention again. I flew down to where he was milling about with a couple of young fae holding large bouquets of fresh goldesses, their glimmering curly petals and gleaming metallic stems distorting my reflection. Jylan's wrinkly face was turned down in a contemplative frown, and his hair was sticking up, as if he had been running his hands through it.

Before I could speak one word in greeting, the rumbling

started. It was almost unnoticeable at first, a slight tremor in the earth that I could feel in the soles of my feet. I crinkled my brow in confusion as the lanterns began to sway in the air, the lights leaving glowing trails in the dusky sky.

One moment, the square was neatly in my view, the next it was a blur as I was tossed sideways by the heaving earth. I couldn't catch myself before I slammed into the ground and rolled, trying to lessen the impact. Right above me, the platforms shook as the silverwood threads rippled. Terror gripped me, and I twisted onto my hands and knees, preparing to leap out of the way if the platforms came crashing down.

The ground cracked as I stared at it, fissures forking like lightning strikes. Screams echoed throughout the square, but then a deeper rumble started, capturing all of my senses. At first, it was barely noticeable, but it grew louder, and louder still, until my head was buzzing with the deep tone and the earth was quaking to its tempo. In that moment, I knew it was a promise of greater destruction—that it was going to tear the fabric of the world apart and burn the remnants to ash.

My vision went black, and I was falling, falling, falling in an endless descent, darkness smothering me. There was no light, no sound, no sensation. Until a deep voice, wispy and grated, whispered in my ear: "*Allina.*"

The rumbling stopped. My vision returned. The world seemed to freeze with its silence. I waited a long moment, and when nothing more happened, I dropped my forehead to the ground, releasing my fear in a strangled sob.

# Three

WHEN ERELIE FLEW into the square, I had never been so grateful. Her eyes were wide with terror, tears tracking down her cheeks. I shouted and waved, beckoning her over, and we hugged each other tight.

Though carnage surrounded us, we weren't allowed to stay and help with the cleanup. The guards shepherded us to the palace, forcing my uncle's orders in the name of our safety.

Soon, the Sun Palace rose in front of us, each white stone glimmering in the dying light. Built by my most distant ancestors, the Sun Palace was an enormous quartz sphere perched on the trunk of a fossilized tree, branches long turned to stone cradling the sloped sides in a tight, winding embrace. Every sunrise and sunset, it glowed golden with the light of the sun, true to its name.

Twice as many guards were stationed at the entrance to the palace than there had been in the past. They bowed as we entered, but didn't acknowledge us beyond that. King Osreth, Queen Ryena, and a handful of higher nobility were seated in the dining hall when we arrived.

We ate in silence, which was normal, but strange given the event we had all just experienced. Osreth had shut our inquiries down the moment we had started to speak them. Pretending the earthquake had never happened was absurd, but I did as I was told, even as I saw the glint of fear in his eyes and wondered what he knew—what he was keeping from everyone in the room.

We'd never had an earthquake in Suntrul. In all of Sorcen's written history, there had never been a record of anything remotely resembling one. Even the old tales passed down by song and poem held no allusion to Aurric shaking the ground in his wrath. But without Osreth's answers, I was left to only my thoughts, and I had no guess as to what could have caused it.

Without conversation, only the tinkling of silverware remained in the dining hall. Eyes flitted around the table as we ate. Dinner had become a sordid affair, like everything else.

Ryena ignored me as usual, her expression cool and unbothered. Osreth didn't even glance my way. I tried to focus on the feast laid out in front of me, but their presences were suffocating. I shovelled one piece of venison into my mouth and fled before I had the chance to be dismissed.

Two new guards trailed me as I flew to my rooms. Once I reached them, I slammed the door behind me, ensuring they had no doubts about whether they were allowed in or not. I curled up on top of my white comforter, ignoring the fact that I was filthy.

Tomorrow would be Midsummer's Eve, and everything would be better then. Dancing beside the bonfire, under the influence of strawberry wine, I could pretend I was happy. Or, maybe, if I was lucky, I *would* be happy.



I GROANED IN pain as I dragged my eyelids open and struggled to kick the covers to the foot of my bed. When I had accomplished that much, I rolled to the edge and moved to stand as gently as possible.

Stretching my arms out, I winced at their stiffness. I twisted my back, feeling it crack and loosen. A bowl of water was already on my nightstand, and I splashed my face, the cold shocking me awake. My near-death fight with the kyvre and heavy fall caused by the mysterious earthquake hadn't treated me well, and I needed to find the healer again if I wanted to enjoy Midsummer's Eve to the fullest.

Throwing on a rumpled, loose tunic and tan leather trousers unbecoming a princess, I trudged to the door. Before I could fling it open, I heard a muffled cough on the other side and clenched my teeth in frustration.

*The guards.*

I had forgotten about them. Not that they mattered.

I opened the door and slipped into the hallway, the guards remaining entirely oblivious. My illusion cloaked me as I wandered to the infirmary, avoiding the paths lined with Osreth's trees.

Though the greenery brought life to the sparse stone halls, Osreth's plants weren't only for decoration. They were his eyes and ears, and they knew I was sneaking through the hallways, my illusions unable to fool the very nature which worked in conjunction with my magic.

But most of his plants were too young or starved of sunlight, their whispers too quiet to attract his attention. Only trees that grew old enough and strong enough could make their whispers heard. And it was difficult to grow strong with branches stifled by a ceiling and roots stuck in small pots. The misfortune of the trees was fortunate for me, however, as their weakness was the only reason my every movement wasn't tracked by Osreth.

Once I reached the infirmary doors, I became visible again for the healer's sake. The healing process was faster than the day before, and I flew recklessly down the hallway, not bothering to hide myself.

I was strong and vibrant. My head was clear, my limbs free of exhaustion. Coupled with my excitement for Midsummer's Eve, I was invincible.

"General Ferris." Osreth's voice echoed off the quartz walls.

I sunk to the floor, shrouding myself with an illusion in the same heartbeat. It was always easier to hear without my wings beating right next to my ears.

"Your Majesty." Armour clanked as the general presumably bowed.

*Which general?* My uncle had a few. I poked my head around the corner to get a glimpse, staying cautious.

I had never seen him before. Even as I wracked my brain trying to remember the general's large, ruddy face, I was sure of it. To me, he was a stranger. And that was strange in itself, because Osreth hadn't been treating strangers kindly.

They moved farther down the hall, voices fading. I recalled my uncle's words as I followed the pair: *Don't ever use your magic to take advantage of anyone. I would be very disappointed in you, Allina, if I ever discovered that you were betraying the trust of your friends or family.*

For years I had listened to him, until I couldn't stand it anymore. My magic was always lurking beneath my skin, ready to erupt. Fighting back my guilt, I had started to create illusions by sneaking up on small rodents in the caves high up in the Skybrush Mountains, where the trees couldn't see me and report back to Osreth.

If the animals noticed me, I tried harder. If they were oblivious, I did it again and again, until I could have captured every single creature in Sorcen with my bare hands.

When hiding myself became too easy, I began to make them see things—a wolf stalking them, a bird of prey swooping down from the sky to snatch them away. They would screech and scamper as my illusion chased them, and stare in confusion when it disappeared without a trace.

General Ferris cleared his throat. “Your Highness, about the Ki—”

“Not here,” Osreth interrupted harshly, his green wings flaring. His vicious glare had the general studying the floor. Nothing else was said for the remainder of their walk.

The first time I snuck into one of my uncle's council sessions had been five years ago. I was fourteen, and guilt made my stomach hurt so much I thought I would faint. Shame clouded my thoughts, until the meeting started and I discovered what it was about—agricultural planning. For what felt like forever, I listened to opinions about stockpiling food for the dry season: what types of crops should be grown, how large should each farmer's tithe be, and if more greenhouses should be built.

After that, my eavesdropping became a regular occurrence. I made sure to get caught visibly sneaking into the room occasionally, to make it look like I was trying to do it magic-less. Osreth always rolled his eyes and calmly ushered me out.

Osreth had no vassals—he ruled absolutely. The nobility of Sorcen were of title only, a meaningless form of praise issued by the royal family to keep the peace. Every problem was Osreth’s problem to hear and solve, with input from a handful of trusted councillors. Many council sessions took place in the Sun Palace, and I tried to attend most of them, usually forgoing my formal lessons in the process. But this form of learning was far more valuable.

The two fae reached the council room, and I squeezed in behind the general before the large walnut doors shut. I recognized the rest of the members seated around the curved table, carved from one thick slab of gray granite—the only interesting feature in the otherwise unadorned room. Ryena was there. So were Captain Oakthorn and several other high-ranking palace guards.

The military generals were there, too. I hadn’t seen them around the palace in years. In times of peace, which was constant these days, they enjoyed their meaningless elevated ranks by spending time at their homes on the coast, far away from the politics of Suntrul. If they were back, it was for something serious.

I crouched in the corner, waiting for the session to start. Ryena grabbed Osreth’s hand as soon as he sat down, in a rare display of affection. He gave it a light squeeze, then let go, clasping his hands in front of him on the table.

“Welcome, everyone. We’re here to discuss security arrangements for the Midsummer’s Eve celebration tonight. Now, Captain Oakthorn, in terms of the town...”

The captain spoke and presented a lengthy overview of where each squad would be stationed, and how the guard would be tripled around the palace. Each door to the throne room would have ten guards stationed outside, in addition to the hundred on the inside. That was unusual. He must have had something extravagant planned for the Midsummer’s Eve ritual. My heart beat louder with excitement.

Every now and again, someone else would give their opinion, and the plans would be altered. Soon, my thoughts



drifted back to the night's possibilities, and the droning voices faded to the background. I jolted when I heard chairs scraping against the floor, surprised to see the session finished so quickly.

But I soon realized that it wasn't over when Ryena, Osreth, and General Ferris lingered behind. They made sure the door was shut tight again before they started talking.

"Now, as I was saying in the hall," General Ferris began, "what about the Kingsdaughter? I've heard rumours stating otherwise."

My heart stopped beating.

"Our plans haven't changed, Ferris," Osreth said dismissively, his knuckles cracking as he clenched his hands tight.

"Are you certain, Osreth? I've heard the same rumours," Ryena contributed, standing to look down at her husband. "You won't be able to," she challenged, a sneer twisting her graceful features.

"I will *do it myself* if needed." Osreth stood, scowling at Ryena. He towered over her, but she didn't back down.

"It's for Erelie, Osreth." Tears twinkled in the corners of her eyes. "She'll be in danger if you—*we*—don't do it. Our daughter can't die because of your cowardice."

"I've already given you my word." His eyes were cold; his mouth a hard line. "I don't wish to discuss this."

"If you can't even *discuss it*, then how will you be able to *do it*?" she hissed, fingernails scraping the polished stone of the table, stars coming to life in her eyes as her magic took over her better sense.

"Do not let one more *foolish* word leave your mouth," Osreth growled, teeth clenched. One blink and his eyes glowed bright green, the veins that stretched from his neck to his arms pouring light. Ryena's eyes went wide, stars fading, and, wisely, she remained silent.

The general coughed and Osreth's head snapped his way.

“About the Liral Court, Your Majesty. I’ve heard tha—”

“*Enough*,” Osreth interrupted. “General, come to my chambers. We’ll work out the specifics for tonight’s *celebration* there.”

His robes swayed and his wings fluttered incessantly as he stalked to the door, General Ferris scurrying to fall in step with him. Just before he touched the door handle, Ryena found her voice.

“Promise me,” she ordered, stars bright again, meteors plummeting and suns erupting across the room as the universe in her eyes expanded. “*Promise me you’ll kill her.*”

The world tilted and my vision blurred as I fought to keep my illusion in place.

Glowing eyes never leaving Ryena’s, Osreth opened the door and stomped through with General Ferris. The wood shuddered as he slammed it closed behind him. Stars fading, Ryena crumpled onto the table, sobbing loudly. As she trembled, her silver hair rippled like a waterfall.

I left in a daze. I didn’t remember how I got back to my rooms, but I collapsed onto my bed, unwittingly mimicking Ryena’s tragic pose, except that I didn’t cry. I couldn’t.

I was hollow, like the husk of the palace I had always called my home.

Ryena was wrong. My uncle would never kill me. He loved me. He had told me he would always take care of me. But...

*I will do it myself if needed.*

Those words sent a chill up my spine. He could have meant something else—something not murderous—and Ryena had just exaggerated. She hated me—she *always* had.

He had to have meant something else. Maybe I was going to be even more severely disciplined than I was now. Maybe I would be locked in my room. But not killed.

The fae of Sorcen would riot if I were executed. I was *their* Kingsdaughter—the beloved, orphaned princess that had persevered despite the brutal deaths of her parents. Osreth

knew that.

He hadn't promised Ryena that he would kill me, either. He had looked at her like she was a bug he wanted to swat from the air.

"It's not true." I repeated the words out loud until my voice was hoarse, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't rid my head of the conversation.

*Why did General Ferris mention the Liral Court?*

The thought served as a distraction and reasons swirled in my brain. Their Midsummer's Eve festival could be tonight as well. The general could have discovered that they had something gruesome planned involving the Sorcen Court. That could be why security had been escalated to such unreasonable amounts.

It could also be why Osreth had been keeping everyone inside the palace. The day before, he had said that I was involved in a circumstance that I didn't understand. Liral could be planning to assault us in their own twisted way of celebration.

A group of ladies-in-waiting entered my room and interrupted my contemplation. They bustled about—running a bath, mixing fragrant oils, laying out my dress. I had to be prepared for Midsummer's Eve, of course. Celebrating no longer made my pulse race, or my lips absentmindedly quirk up in a smile.

For the next while I was barely responsive, only lifting my arms when I was told to lift them, tilting my head up or down when prompted. As time passed, Osreth and Ryena's conversation was all I thought about, all I could hear in my head.

*I will do it myself if I have to.*

When the ladies-in-waiting were finished, I looked at the gilded mirror in front of me and praised their efforts, as was polite and expected. My hair had been twisted into a thick golden braid that curved across my left shoulder before falling to the middle of my waist. Golden jewelry gleamed on my

ears, my wrists, my neck. I tried, but I couldn't focus on my reflection, couldn't bring myself to care. Becoming beautiful didn't matter anymore. Nothing did.

*My uncle was going to kill me.*

There was no other explanation, no other reason why he wouldn't correct Ryena's accusation—why he wouldn't tell her that she was wrong, that he would not let me come to any harm.

I had to leave. While everyone was preoccupied, I would run away to the human territories and I would *never* come back.

# Four

THE LADIES-IN-WAITING TIED me into a breathtaking green dress with off-the-shoulder sleeves that left my arms bare, the fabric twisting at the bodice and opening at my back before flowing into a skirt that fell to my calves in layers—the accomplishment of a master seamstress, wasted on me and my pending escape.

A knock sounded at the door and a servant informed me that I was expected in the throne room. I slid my feet into leather sandals painted gold, the crisscrossed straps climbing to my knees, and ushered the ladies-in-waiting out with some pleasantries.

Finally alone, I strapped my dagger to the outside of my thigh, the protrusion hidden by the many layers of my skirt. I wouldn't leave without the means to defend myself.

Shades of orange peeked into my room as the sun set and I stood in front of the door, my hand frozen in the act of reaching for the handle.

My uncle was expecting me. *Erelie* was expecting me. I had been so excited yesterday.

If I didn't attend, then my absence would look suspicious. If I did attend, then my melancholy would make them wary.

I settled my indecisiveness by falling to my knees and holding my head in my hands.

I couldn't go. I couldn't look at them. Just being alone, I felt ill. In front of them, I wouldn't be able to fake happiness, or excitement, or whatever they were expecting.

"I feel unwell," I called to the guards outside my door. "Please inform the King that I will not be attending the celebration in the throne room, nor any other part of the festivities."

"Yes, Your Highness," one replied. I trudged to my bed and sprawled across it, not caring about crumpling my dress or

messing up my hair. I felt nothing as I stared at the ceiling. For a long time, I traced the pattern of green and golden swirls with my eyes.

That was the last time I would lie there and see my ceiling. My room. My *life*.

A disturbance in the hallway reached my ears, but I didn't move. An incessant banging started on my locked door. Then Erelie's voice: "Allina, open up. It's already started. You have to come. You have to see."

"I'm ill, Erelie," I said, exaggerating a cough. "I can barely move."

"That doesn't matter," she shouted. "You *have* to know."

I did nothing and she let out an exasperated yell before giving up. I closed my eyes, but I should have known better.

"Open this damn door!" she screeched, a flare of her magic sending hot, blinding light through the door and into my closed eyelids. The uncharacteristic outburst shocked me into listening to her.

She exploded into the room, eyes wide, hands gesturing. "Allina, you won't believe it."

"What?"

"He has the *Nightheart*," she said breathlessly. My fog of sadness dissipated.

"What do you mean?"

"Father captured the Nightheart, Prince Cohrven," she explained, speaking slower as I worked through my astonishment. "He's in the throne room."

I flew out the door before she had finished speaking.

"What's happening?" I asked when she caught up to me. "Why did your father capture him? Why would he *dare*?"

All I knew of the Liral Court, I had only learned from whispers leaked by the other nobility. Every five years, an ambassador from Sorcen would cross over to Liral in a gesture of good faith towards the truce to which we were bound. If the

ambassador returned unharmed, the truce remained upheld.

And all Sorcen ambassadors had returned. Liral, however, had never returned the favour by sending one of their own.

Of the numerous whispers spread by the ambassadors, one central figure had earned the true fear of Sorcen fae: Prince Cohrven Nighthart, heir to the Liral Court's throne. He had earned his name and his title by stabbing his older brother to death when he was twelve. The stories I'd heard... he was a monster, and it was said that his power was unimaginable.

The Liral King would destroy us all to get his only son back. If Cohrven were to be executed by Sorcen, we would be razed.

"Father's declared war on the Liral Court," Erelie said. We neared the throne room and the horde of guards that protected it. "Capturing the Nighthart was just the beginning. For years, he's been planning it, and now it's finally coming to fruition. It's why things have been so strange lately."

"He wants a *war*?" I couldn't believe it. "Why would he ever want a war?"

"To expand Sorcen and rid the world of Liral's evils. Aurric spoke to him in a vision." She paused to make her point known, sounding almost... proud. "He's acting on Aurric's command."

I grabbed Erelie's arm and stopped her while we were still out of earshot of the guards. "Erelie, this is insanity. Aurric does not actually speak to your father. You know that, don't you?"

I grasped her shoulders while she looked up at me with a furrowed brow and unsure eyes. Though she wouldn't report me for my heresy, my statement stunned her into questioning her father's claims.

"I'm not sure what to think, Allina, but I have to trust my father." Her uncertain eyes met the floor. "It's too late for anything *but* war. You'll realize that once you see *him*."

She whirled out of my grasp, ending our conversation and walking into the throne room ahead of me.



I waited for a moment, then cracked the door open to peer through. There was a giant crowd of nobles, more than I had ever seen gathered in the palace before. Stands had been built, tiered on every wall, so that thousands of fae could watch the spectacle in the centre. Most of them had their hands over their mouths; all of them were leaning forward in their seats, staring intently at something. I heard a crack, and the crowd collectively gasped. They were so focused no one even glanced at me when I entered and gasped with them.

The Nightheart was the spectacle.

Thick iron manacles were clamped around his wrists and his ankles, loosely chained to twin stone pillars jutting out of the floor on either side of him. His chest was bare, his pale skin marred by deep, long cuts weeping blood. As the whip came down and he screamed in agony, sweat dripped from his black hair to pool on the stone floor.

Chest heaving, he opened his eyes and surveyed the crowd, as if he was memorizing every single face. His dark eyes met mine, so full of rage and hatred I had to look away. He clenched them shut again when the next strike fell. The whip struck his cheek and dragged down his neck, leaving a neat red slice. My stomach turned at the sight.

He was standing tall, muscles trembling with effort, and I wondered at how he hadn't collapsed. Looking closer, I gasped when I saw why. There were clamps on his endlessly-black outstretched wings: tiny, sharp pieces of metal on both sides, barely piercing through the membranes. They were attached to the pillars, with no give.

He was a fly caught in a spider's web, and I understood. If he fell, his wings would be shredded, and it would be because of his own weakness. *He would be made to destroy his own wings.*

I couldn't watch it anymore. My head spun and I looked down at my feet. I had to leave before he fell, before his wings...

*How could my uncle condone this?* Perched on his golden throne, garbed in opulent red robes and a tall, twisting crown

of gleaming walnut, he was... *smiling*.

For the first time since overhearing Ryena, I felt hatred. I hated my uncle, who had taken care of me when I had no one, who had taught me how to fly, who had spent so much time telling me stories about my parents—ones that made me laugh and cry.

I trusted him. I had *always* trusted him.

The Nightheart cried out as the whip bit into his flesh with a loud crack.

But not anymore.

I looked back to the prince. His head had finally dropped to his chest, and his shoulders had slumped. The whip lashed against his stomach and he let out another harsh cry. His muscles flexed and the chains rattled as he pulled against them in one last useless attempt to free himself.

My gut twisted. He was the Nightheart. Why would I ever pity someone who had murdered his own brother? He was from the Liral Court, where monsters roamed and depravity was rewarded.

But we were both victims of my uncle; we were both sentenced to die on a whim of his. In that, we had one thing in common.

It was enough.

*I would save Prince Cohrven.*

The whip dug into his shoulder and sliced diagonally across every other cut on his chest. His whole body shook and I wanted to scream at him to stay standing, but I couldn't breathe. His legs gave out and he sunk to his knees. The metal clamps sliced a jagged path through his wings, the ripping sounds drowned out by his tormented roar.

The room shook, just like yesterday's earthquake. As the tiered stands tottered on their wooden footings, my uncle's smug expression slipped into shock. He gripped the armrests on his throne and stood, looking ready to fly, to save himself.

The rumbling stopped abruptly and my uncle sat down

again, taking a subtle glance around the room to see if anyone had noticed his brief moment of cowardice.

While everyone in the audience was staring at the prince in fascinated horror, I loosed my magic. No one could hear me. No one could see me. If anyone were to look for me, they would see my illusion staring in horrified fascination along with the rest of them.

I launched myself off the step and dropped to the ground in front of the Nightheart.

Up close, I could hear Prince Cohrven's hacking breaths. I could see the numerous bloody puncture wounds on his neck from whatever injections they had given him to stifle his magic.

The guard was smiling, pleased with his performance. My fists curled involuntarily. I wanted to break his teeth.

At that very moment, my uncle stood and started speaking again of Aurricc, the words unintelligible to me. He went on and on—the prattling of a fool who thought himself the conduit of a god. I wanted to break *my uncle's* teeth.

I cast an even larger illusion, one that left me gasping for air. They would all see the Nightheart as he was at that moment, helpless on the ground while I escaped with him.

Anger almost turned my vision black when I saw the key for the manacles wasn't hanging on the guard's hip—it was on the ground in front of Cohrven, right out of his reach.

The whole time he was being whipped he would have been fixated on that key, wondering if it would be worth the pain of destroying his wings in the effort to free himself. If he had taken that chance, he would have found the key to be too far from him anyway.

When I unlocked the manacles from his wrists, his hands fell to the floor with a thud. When I unlocked the manacles from his ankles, he remained unmoving and unresponsive, hunched over, his head hung low.

We didn't have much time, so I grabbed his arms and started dragging his heavy body along the floor. He hissed in pain and

finally looked at me with dilated, empty eyes.

“Get up!” I ordered, tugging his arm. He obeyed wordlessly, pulling himself up in one jerky motion and slumping into me. I wrapped his arm around my shoulders and fastened one of my own around his waist, careful not to touch the wounds on his chest.

“They can’t see us yet, but we have to move fast.” I tried to jog, supporting his large frame as he stumbled alongside me. With every step, he grunted in pain and let out a laboured breath. After what felt like an eternity, we were out the door, past the crowd of guards, and shuffling down the hall.

In very little time, the guard would bring his whip down and hit only air, frown in confusion, then realize that something was very wrong. At that very moment of clarity, my illusion would fade to reveal that Prince Cohrven Nightheart, the centre of Osreth’s grand celebration, had escaped.

And my uncle would know it had been me. There was no one else who could have done it.

I had no regrets about betraying him. Osreth was going to have me killed. I accepted that as a certainty now, after seeing the extent of his cruelty. I was going to save myself *and* the tortured prince in my arms.

We were both getting out, or neither of us was.

In order to ensure our survival, I had to get to the waterfall. It was my biggest secret—how I managed to leave the palace without being seen. The waterfall plunged from the very top floor of the palace into the earth. My father had made the connection, taking water flowing through the Sorcsl river and sending it to that exact point in the middle of the palace. It fell past every floor into the cavernous underground river that ran deep below the palace—or so that’s what every other fae thought.

One of my earliest memories was of him taking me through the waterfall. I could barely remember his face, but I remembered his voice when he said that I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone about the passage—even Uncle Osreth.

Once the waterfall hit the ground, it didn't disperse into the underground river—it flowed right back into the river it had been taken out of. All I had to do was fly beside it, or, in my present situation, throw Cohrven in and jump after him, and we would end up safe in the Sorosl river, a week's flight from the Sun Palace.

I heard the throne room doors bust open behind us, loud, frenzied shouting spilling out. My illusion was over. I created a new one, shielding us from everyone's sight. It wouldn't last long either.

Cohrven was slowing down, breathing in stuttering, harsh gasps. I caught him as he fell, wrenching my shoulders as I kept him standing. Blood dripped on the floor as we stood still.

I dragged him into a small alcove and let him catch his breath as I planned the rest of our escape. The waterfall was a few more corridors farther than I would have liked, but we could reach it in time.

*We would* make it. There was no other option.

I grit my teeth and started forward, but Cohrven took one step and collapsed onto me, his left hand gripping the fabric of my dress and pulling it painfully tight against my shoulder as he tried to keep himself standing.

"*No*," I whispered. He couldn't stop, not now. If he stopped...

"You have to keep going," I begged. "I'm getting us out of here."

No response.

"Move. We're going to die if you don't," I prompted, desperation causing me to lose control of my magic. My illusion flickered.

A guard flew around the corner and almost slammed into us. He stared for a moment, dropping to the ground and reaching for his sword instinctively, his expression mirroring my own shocked one.

I didn't react quickly enough.

The guard opened his mouth to yell for the others. But before anything could come out, Cohrven's hand lashed forward to clamp around the guard's throat. With a clench of his fingers and a twitch of his wrist, he snapped the guard's neck. The corpse hit the floor with bulging eyes, his armour clattering loudly.

I pulled Cohrven out of the alcove and ran without looking back. He was able to keep up, though I still bore the brunt of his weight. A new illusion hid us and the guard's body, but my magic was dissipating. My muscles burned as I turned left, down the final corridor. The dull roar of the waterfall grew louder and I let out a sigh of relief.

I dragged Cohrven along the edge of the wall. Guards rushed past us, shouting orders. When the shouts increased and a general sense of panic set in, I knew they had found the dead guard's corpse.

Just moments before, his responsibility had been to protect me.

I hadn't even known his name. I should have felt guilt at his death, but I couldn't bring myself to grieve. If my uncle caught me, I would be dead. The guard had been trying to make that happen.

When I heard the crack of his spine, I had felt relief more than anything else.

Mist clung to my skin, making my dress stick to my body. We reached the circular room that housed the waterfall, waist-high railings surrounding the large cavity through which it fell, protecting passersby from falling. Spray fogged up the room, so much that the guards were blurry outlines.

My arms spasmed in pain and I released Cohrven. He clasped the railing and hunched over it, blood running down his torso and pooling at his feet.

There was too much red. Down the hallway, a smeared trail of blood led to us.

"Don't move, Allina." Osreth's voice cut through the mist. Cohrven lifted his head, his muscles trembling as he tried to

stay upright. We were caught, but we were just one fall away from freedom.

“*What are you doing?*” Osreth demanded as he strode into view, enunciating every syllable. His tall crown was askew and his fingers twitched at his sides, opening into claws before curling into tight fists. Guards surrounded us, notching arrows before pulling back their bowstrings.

“Stay away!” I shouted, stepping in front of Cohrven and raising my tiny, useless dagger.

“Allina, Cohrven Nightheart is our prisoner. Release him. We need him for the war.” He spoke in an over-exaggerated way, as if I were a child too young to understand the wicked ways of the world.

“You want to have me killed.” He slipped and I saw it, the slight twitch of his brow, the minute hesitation, the way his eyes widened in shock instead of narrowing in confusion.

So, it was true.

“That’s preposterous. I have raised you as my own daughter.” The appalled mask he wore was almost convincing.

“You have, but you know that I’m not your daughter. I’m Allina Kingsdaughter. I’m a threat. If our subjects don’t like this war, they can get rid of you, Ryena, and Erelie, then crown me. I understand.”

“I love you, Allina. I would never, *ever* wish for your death.” The false sincerity dripping behind his words made me grimace.

“Love me all you want,” I spat. “You’ll still do what you think is necessary, even if you have tears in your eyes as you bring the dagger down.”

“Listen to me!” he shouted, calm pretence gone. “Hand over the prince and I’ll let you leave the palace. I never planned to harm you, but if you feel unsafe here, I will let you go. Just give me the Nightheart.”

“No.” I bared my teeth at him and he recoiled.

“That is an order, Allina!” Glowing veins throbbed in his



neck, and his face grew red behind the vibrant light. “Let go of him, and we will put this foolishness behind us.”

I shook my head.

Osreth’s face hardened as he flung his arm forward. “Kill them.”

The archers beside him loosed their arrows with a twang. They missed us by a wide margin, flying clear through the spot where I had made them all think Cohrven and I had been standing. At the same moment, I wrapped my arms around Cohrven’s waist from behind, ignored his gasp of pain, and toppled us backwards over the railing and into the waterfall.

# Five

WATER PUMMELLED ME as I fell downwards. An inhalation sent burning liquid up my nose and I coughed, trying to sputter it out as my lungs begged for air. Despite the discomfort, my arms stayed locked around Cohrven, but his skin was slippery with blood and my grip was loosening. He had gone limp, having finally passed out from the pain.

I didn't know how long the fall would take, but we would land in the river eventually. The proof of Osreth's betrayal, his order to kill me, hadn't hit me yet, but I knew it would. And when it did hit, I knew the despair, the rage, the desire for vengeance would be overwhelming. That was a distraction I couldn't afford. I hadn't escaped Osreth only to be killed by his memory.

I had more pressing issues to worry about, such as keeping myself and the dying prince in my arms alive.

Suddenly, instead of falling down, I shot to the side, water pounding against me and forcing Cohrven out of my grasp. After a desperate scramble, I brought my head above the water and gulped in air. The river was rough and steep, the current tossing me to either side and pushing me forward relentlessly.

I searched for Cohrven frantically, spotting his black hair a little farther downstream. Working to keep my head above water, I splashed towards him, pushing my aching muscles to their limits.

I caught him about his waist with one arm, and used my other to paddle. He was so heavy we kept dipping underwater, my progress sluggish compared to the savage flow of the river. Water rushed into my mouth and I choked it out, ignoring the burn.

I *had* to be strong enough. I *had* to get us to the bank.

We sank down again and I pushed up with my free arm and kicked my legs. My toes dragged against mud and my chest clenched in relief. Feet touching the riverbed, I fought through

the current, moving with it diagonally, towards solid ground. The riverbank was rocky, the forest beyond it dark and silent.

I crawled up the rocks first, then grabbed Cohrven by his armpits and pulled him from the current, making sure only his legs dragged along the ground, minimizing the damage to his torn wings and wrecked chest. Once I had climbed past the rocks and onto soft grass, I let him down on his back.

Blood still gushed from his wounds. He was still—*unnaturally* still. I panicked as I realized he might have swallowed too much water, and my rescue attempt had been in vain.

Kneeling at his side, I checked his neck for a pulse. It was sluggish, but still there. After a brief moment of reservation, I pounded the heel of my palm into his shredded stomach, trying to pump the water from his lungs.

“Breathe,” I begged. “Please.” After a few rough punches, he coughed up water and gasped, taking rapid, stuttered breaths. Then he opened his eyes, focusing on mine briefly before his eyelids fluttered closed again.

“H-healer. Witherton,” he said, voice strained and almost unintelligible, before his head lolled to the side.

I had no idea what Witherton was, so I didn’t dwell on it. But I agreed with him about the healer. Without one, he was going to die.

Fortunately, my Midsummer’s Eve dress had been long and layered. I used my dagger to cut off all the fabric that fell past my knees. The scraps of cloth were drenched, but hopefully they would help to staunch the blood flow.

I took a deep breath and inspected his wounds.

Skin curled away from the deep cuts, and I fought to stay detached as I wrapped each strip of fabric around his torso, being careful not to touch his wings. The scraps soaked up blood and turned dark crimson immediately.

Next, we had to get out of open sight. I hauled him into the forest, even though my shoulders were ready to rip from their sockets, the earlier dull ache of infrequent use turning into the

acute pain of over-exertion. There was a small rock formation about twenty feet into the tree canopy, and I made it there through sheer will to find a shelter hidden behind parched brown vines.

The stone floor of the shelter was covered with mud and dry leaves, and I loathed placing Cohrven's wounds so close to filth. I had no choice, though, and let him down on his side, making sure his wings weren't pinned beneath his body.

I took a deep breath and collapsed beside him, taking a break that I really couldn't afford. I had to find a gnome. They were incredibly powerful healers, and cared very little for royalty and politics, their long lifespans leading them to disinterest. Regardless, the news of the war and my treason wouldn't reach them for months, if not longer, given their preference for seclusion.

*My treason.* A traitor—that's who I was now. My death warrant had probably already been sealed and couriered to every corner of the court. Osreth wouldn't assume I was dead until he had seen my corpse.

If only they knew the truth of it.

My uncle had betrayed me, so I had betrayed him in kind. Not that it mattered—to me, to my subjects, to Erelie. It wasn't as if I was planning to stay in my court any longer than necessary.

I stretched my arms and winced, my tired limbs already stiffening. Slowly, I forced myself up onto my feet, bracing against the rock wall when my legs started to tremor.

I had to start searching. My stomach turned at the thought of leaving Cohrven alone, but without a gnome he'd be dead before nightfall.

His brow was creased and his jaw clenched, even while unconscious. Fainting had been a mercy, compared to the agony he would have felt while awake.

Osreth's smirk flashed through my mind. Cohrven's screams had *amused* my uncle.

I took a deep breath. Time to search for a gnome. I pushed

all other thoughts out of my head. Later I could be upset. Once I had saved Cohrven.

As long as I kept moving, my mind was focused and clear. My legs wobbled as I tried to remain standing, so I unfurled my wings and flew above the thick canopy to get my bearings. The Skybrush Mountains were far to my right, marking Sorcen's southern border. According to legend, the Crossover lay somewhere beyond the jagged mountain range, its true location hidden by divine power.

No matter how horrific it may be, the Liral Court was my destination. If Osreth had managed to bring Cohrven to Sorcen without much of a struggle, he must have known a simple way to reach the Crossover. That meant I could reach it too.

I had to get Liral's prince home and stop my uncle's foolish war. But first, the prince had to survive. I dropped back down to the forest floor and flew just above the ground, searching every tangle of roots and thoroughly inspecting every overly-large mushroom.

I was looking for one gnome in particular. Noranin was a gnome I'd spent an entire day with a couple of years ago after coming across her along the banks of the river. She was five hundred years old, and had thirty children and ninety-six grandchildren, with two more on the way. Forty years ago, her husband had fallen to his death trying to forage a rare mushroom, and she lived alone these days, her cozy home sequestered deep in a stone cavern, free from any roots that would carry our voices to Osreth's ears.

Most importantly, she was an exceptional healer. Waves of magic cascaded from her. When I returned home the night of my first visit, I discovered that a bruise on my knee had been healed simply by sitting next to her.

I only hoped she remembered me. It had been years since our first meeting, though not for a lack of trying on my part.

If a gnome didn't want to be found, they wouldn't be.

And Noranin didn't want to be found.

There was no one in the forest, only tiny squirrels hopping

through the boughs and birds scampering through the thick undergrowth. A trickle of my magic remained, so I cast it out as far as I could, in one final burst of effort.

Maybe something, someone, would pick up on the magic. Maybe Noranin would recognize it as mine. There was nothing more I could do.

Defeated, I used the last of my strength to return to my makeshift shelter. Cohrven was still inside, undisturbed and unconscious. I crumpled to the ground beside him and leaned back against the jagged rock wall.

My head was thick with exhaustion, my body slow to react. I could feel sleep coming upon me, but I didn't close my eyes. I *couldn't*.

At least we were safe from my uncle and his soldiers. The trees wouldn't reach Osreth for days, so he wouldn't even have confirmation that we were alive until he heard their whispers.

But I had just fought a kyvre, so who knew how many Liral beasts had crossed over and were roaming Sorcen? A cravenwolf could come, eyes burning red and nostrils breathing smoke, drawn to the scent of Cohrven's blood. A shatteringshade could find us, attracted to my despair, and scream until our ears bled, its incorporeal body impossible for me to stab.

Night would be upon us soon. To keep us safe, I had to stay awake.

I shifted my attention to Cohrven, kneeling over his large body. He stretched across the width of the shelter, with less than a pace between his feet and the slimy wall. I checked my pathetic wrappings. Some spots were rusty and dry, indicating that his bleeding had subsided a little.

I rubbed my red fingertips clean on my dress and finally focused on his wings. They had been large and beautiful, and as dark as the night sky, absorbing any light cast in their direction. Because of my uncle, they were in jagged pieces, barely held together. Both of his wings had been sliced from

base to apex in four separate places.

I had never seen anything so brutal in my entire life.

I shivered and made sure my own wings were gathered at my back. Wing membranes were strong, but they almost never healed. Once the membrane was severed, the surrounding tissue died. Very rarely, winged fae would hit stray branches hard enough to poke a hole through the tough membrane. In lucky cases, rest and immobility would fix small rips, but in most cases the wounds never healed and had to be patched up artificially, with rare successes.

If Cohrven lived, I didn't think he would ever fly again.

I studied his face and rested the back of my hand on his forehead. His flesh was cold and clammy, his lips turning blue. My stomach plummeted as I realized he was going to die, and there was nothing I could do to save him.

I wracked my brain, trying to think of anything that could stop the bleeding, and came up with nothing. I should have read more books. I should have memorized types of plants and their properties instead of fooling around and spending most of my life in the air. I had no talent for healing, and even if I did, my magic was depleted.

My uncle would win. The Liral prince would die, just as he wanted. He would have his war. Countless fae would be killed, and he might not even be the victor. It was such absurdity, such waste.

Earlier, I feared the Nightheart and the dark rumours that surrounded him. Now, I was trying to save his life. Now, I feared my beloved uncle even more.

I remembered how Cohrven had rattled his chains and cried in agony. How, even when his legs couldn't hold him up anymore, he had still tried to stand. How he had shaken the entire palace when his wings had been shredded.

I couldn't let him die. He didn't deserve it. Especially not when he had fought so hard.

I rolled him onto his back, unwrapped his chest, placed my hands on his bare skin, and took a deep breath. I had to have



some magic left—even just a tiny stream.

But I hesitated.

If I tried to heal him, I could kill him. I could kill myself. I had never learned properly, and there was such a fine line between preserving life and encouraging death. But with luck—a lot of it—I could save him.

If I didn't try, he would die regardless. So, I calmed my mind and called on that small well of magic, deep down and almost unnoticeable. I willed it to flow to my hands, struggling to keep it moving forward. Once I felt it in my fingertips, I pushed it into Cohrven's skin, picturing his cuts closing, his blood flow ebbing.

My heart leapt in pride as I felt my magic leach from me, and I swore his bleeding was slowing, his cuts thinning, his flesh stitching together. Then his body jerked, and his eyes shot wide open.

Blood spilled from his nostrils and spurting from the wounds on his chest. He screamed as he convulsed, his limbs flailing and his head banging against the ground. His eyes rolled back, until I could only see the whites. My hands were soaked with blood as I pressed them into his skin, trying in vain to stop the flow.

I had failed. My magic was gone and I was useless.

Raw cries left his throat, coming out in gurgles when he choked on the blood pouring from his nose. My eyes watered with shame and self-loathing.

I had done this.

I had killed him, in the end. Not my uncle. Not the guard. *Me.*

"I'm sorry," I cried, tears flowing freely. "I'm so sorry."

I moved my hands uselessly along his torso, trying to put enough pressure on the cuts, to do something, *anything*. My eyesight blurred as I bawled, my whole body shaking with desperation.

He let out a cry so loud I had to cover my ears with my

bloody hands. His eyes clenched shut and his body arched so severely I thought his back might break.

I knelt in his blood, the end of my golden braid dragging through the red pool. A spasm sent his leg flying into me and I lost my breath as I crashed into the ground, holding my side and gasping for air.

I wiped my hands and crawled back to him, gripping his chest and reaching for any magic left inside of me, but there was only emptiness. I gave up, holding tight to his chest as my sobs grew loud enough to fill my ears and block his choking sounds.

Bowing my head, I kept my eyes squeezed shut. I couldn't watch him die. I couldn't.

But if I didn't, no one else would. He would die alone, his last moments unseen.

So, I brought my head up and opened my swollen eyelids. Unfocused, his eyes flitted about the cave, ever-searching.

"I'm sorry," I blubbered again. "I never meant for this to happen."

I held my breath as his eyes fixated on one spot, right over my shoulder. I turned to follow his gaze, but as soon as I did, a small, dry palm cupped my forehead.

"I was on my way, you brave, foolish girl." *Noranin*. She was here. "Now, sleep."

Magic flowed into me, then everything went black.

## Six

VOICES WERE COMING from somewhere—a deep rumble followed a higher murmur. They went on for a few moments as I strained to make sense of what was being said, but once they ceased, I cracked my eyes open to see a roughly-hewn rock ceiling illuminated by orange, flickering firelight.

*This wasn't my room.* I tumbled off the narrow bed in my haste, hitting the ground with a loud thump and letting out a cry when I tried to stand up too quickly. My muscles were so stiff I could only lie on the floor.

*Cohrven.* The memories sent a jolt thought me. *Was he alive? Had Noranin made it in time?*

Flipping onto my stomach, I pulled myself onto hands and knees with weak arms. After composing myself, I gripped the edge of my bed and used it to stand up. Slowly, I limped out of the room, ducking under the short door into to the main living area.

A fire blazed there too, the only source of light in the whole room. It was small, the floor covered with mismatched rugs, a few worn pieces of wooden furniture scattered around haphazardly, a cushioned, worn couch seated in front of the fireplace, and even more vials and pots lying about than there had been the last time I visited. A door was open straight across from me, and I dragged myself along the furniture to get there.

Before I could cross the threshold, Noranin came out and stood with her hands on her hips. As short as she was, she still commanded authority. Her wide face was wrinkled with age, her nose red and bulbous, as gnome noses tended to be. Wiry gray hair reached her shoulders, and her blue eyes twinkled, even as they narrowed.

“You foolish child.” She wagged her finger. “Why would you save the Nighthart? Why would you put yourself at such risk?”

“My uncle wants to kill me, Noranin. He was torturing Prince Cohrven to start a war.” That was all I could say, as if it was an acceptable explanation.

It wasn't, but Noranin just sighed, rubbing her forehead in weariness. “You could have died trying to heal him.”

“I know. Did he live?”

She ignored my question. “You did it anyway. Why?”

“I couldn't let him die and I didn't know what else to do,” I admitted, embarrassed by her questions and terrified of her eventual answer to mine. “*Did he live?*”

“Barely. He'll survive—I've made sure of it—but his wings...” She trailed off, and that was all I needed to know. He would never fly again.

“Thank you, Noranin.” I bowed, my stiff back aching even at the slow movement. “Without you, I would have failed and he would be dead.”

“You're welcome, Kingsdaughter.” I tried to move past her and into the room, but even though she was half my height, Noranin stood strong. “He's weak, Allina. He's sleeping.”

“I have to see him breathing.” Her lips pursed in disapproval, but she saw my stark desperation, nodded, and stepped aside. I rushed in as fast as I could—which ended up being a moderately-paced limp—to the side of his cot.

I halted when I saw him. He was lying on his stomach, the mattress underneath him heavily padded, arms stretched out above his head, hands and feet hanging off the cot that was much too small for him. His head was turned to the side, his layered black hair falling to the base of his neck, fanning across his sharp cheekbones, and catching on the thick, dark lashes of his closed eyes.

His beauty struck me—made me forget to take a breath for the briefest moment.

In this sleep, he was calm. His face was smooth. The muscles of his back expanded and relaxed as he breathed in and out.

The ruins of his wings were spread wide, fully showcasing each torn piece. I sat down on the chair beside the bed, unable to take my eyes from them. I moved my hand to touch the black membrane without thinking, my fingertips hovering over the slashed veins.

I glanced at his face, recoiling when I noticed his eyes were open and staring intently at my hand. I yanked it back so fast my elbow hurt. His gaze slid to my face and I looked away sharply in embarrassment. After a few moments of silence, I chanced looking back at him. He was still staring at me, his pupils so dilated I couldn't even see his irises.

"It's alright." His voice was so low and gravelly with exhaustion that it took me a moment to figure out what he had said.

"No. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"I don't mind," he interrupted. His eyes fluttered shut, as if he was fighting to keep them open but failed. "They don't hurt anymore," he slurred. Hesitantly, I reached out again, but this time I brushed the burning skin of his arm, proving to myself that he was real, and not just an illusion I had created out of guilt to fool myself into thinking he was still alive. Gently, I traced his bicep, down to the curve of his shoulder.

Once his breathing slowed, I let my hand drop back to my lap. A wave of exhaustion came over me and I almost tipped out of the chair. Small hands caught me and kept me upright. For a moment, Noranin and I silently watched Cohrven sleep.

I yawned and Noranin tugged on my hand. She led me out of the room and back to the bed I had been sleeping on. Once I was lying down and snuggling into the thick quilt covering me, I couldn't help but speak my mind.

"He doesn't look like a monster."

"Monsters rarely do." Noranin's blue eyes met mine and I shivered at their intensity. "Now go to sleep," she grumbled, touching her palm to my forehead.



*“ALLINA, WHERE ARE you?” I opened my eyes, frowning at the unwelcome voice, still cowering beneath the covers. The screams, the loud, relentless stomping, had finally ceased. I still flinched when the door cracked open.*

*“There you are. Did you have a good sleep?”*

*I peaked out from underneath my covers. Uncle Osreth’s—no, Daddy’s—face was in the doorway, crimson and furious. The whites of his eyes were showing and gray smoke swirled in his pupils. And his reaching hand...the red...*

I woke up sweating. My heart pounded and I gripped the pillow in my fists, taking a long moment to centre myself by surveying every inch of the room surrounding me. I wasn’t in the palace. I wasn’t five anymore.

Rock walls were mostly hidden by hanging quilts sewn from patchwork squares of reds, yellows, and greens, still thick and vibrant despite the passage of time. The fireplace had been hewn into the cave wall, a shallow mantel holding an overflow of empty vials from the living room. Bookshelves were crowded into the space that remained, in between the curtains and beside the door, crammed full of books of various colours, sizes, and languages—not one of them dusty.

A faded painting of a young Noranin and her husband hung above the mantel. I focused on their faces. They looked so content, so vibrant. He had died happy, according to Noranin. He had always loved the thrill of hunting mushrooms, she had said, looking wistfully off into the distance.

I doubted that he was happy at the very end. But Noranin would believe anything that made it easier to bear. Just like I would believe anything that made my memories easier to bear.

I pushed the dream out of my mind. It was just a dream, nothing more. It could never be anything more.

A knock sounded at the door and I twisted to see Noranin standing there with a steaming mug in hand and a deep frown on her face. I sat and she thrust the mug towards me wordlessly. Before I could even bring it to my lips, she spoke.

“He wants to talk to you.” Her frown turned into a hard line.

“I told him he can wait.”

The tea burned my throat as I took a large gulp. “I’m ready now.”

She scowled at me, her thick brows pulling down in disapproval. I pretended to ignore her and got up from the bed, my legs only betraying me with a slight wobble. Finally, I felt awake. My muscles were still stiff, but as I shuffled across the room they began to loosen.

“The Nightheart is not to be trusted,” Noranin stated, a hint of fear tinging her words.

“I *don’t* trust him,” I assured her. And I wouldn’t, not until he gave me a reason to.

# Seven

COHRVEN LAY ON his side on the cot, his wings extended. His eyes, still swallowed by his pupils, followed me from the moment I entered the room to the moment I sat down on the chair in front of him. The cuts on his stomach and chest were covered with white bandages, their cleanliness leading me to believe that he was almost healed. We would probably be able to leave in a few days.

“Kingsdaughter,” he said in greeting. His voice was strained, but stronger than the last time we spoke.

“Nightheart.” His face stayed emotionless at the title.

“What are you going to do now?”

His earnest question caught me off guard, and without thinking, I answered with the truth. “Find the Crossover. Return you to Liral. After that, I’m travelling to the human territories.”

He barked out a short laugh before groaning in pain and recovering his composure, any lingering amusement restricted to a lifted eyebrow. “The human territories...” A long moment passed while he stared at me unashamedly, as if trying to solve a puzzle. “You don’t want to take back your throne?”

“It’s not my throne,” I said instantly, a habit ingrained after facing far too many questions about the Sorcen line of succession. “My father abdicated and banned his offspring from inheriting the throne.”

“So, you’re just going to let your tyrant of an uncle rule your Court?” He was intentionally trying to frustrate me. And succeeding.

“I can’t stay in Sorcen. My uncle will kill me. You heard everything.” The helplessness of my situation bore down on me, the beginnings of panic shaking my fingertips.

I couldn’t think about my uncle. I couldn’t let Cohrven control my emotions, so I gripped the chair beneath me and



tried to slow my breathing.

*Calm*, I needed to be calm. “I don’t owe you anything, least of all the knowledge of my plans.”

“I only ask because I need your help.”

“Why?” I asked, bewildered.

He answered by giving a slight flutter of his wings.

“The damage is permanent.” He should have already known that. “Noranin can’t heal them. Nothing can.”

“Actually, something *can*,” he said, with unnerving confidence. “Have you heard of Witherton?”

“You said it to me at the riverbank, while you were half-dead and delirious.” Blood burst from his cuts again, red flooding every corner of my mind...I dug my fingernails into my thighs, pulling myself back into the present.

He nodded, as if that had been something he *would* say on his death-bed. “It’s a hidden place of god-like magic. Have you heard of *the Wither*?”

“The Wither?”

“Don’t you dare say anything more, *boy*.” Noranin had been listening, it seemed. Like a tempest, she stormed into the room. “That *myth* doesn’t belong in this world anymore.”

“Don’t pretend that it’s imaginary,” Cohrven said, dismissive of her anger.

Noranin turned on him faster than I thought she was ever capable of moving. “I have done you a great favour, Nighthart,” she growled. “One for which I do not expect anything in return. But I will not hesitate to stop your heart from beating if you seek what should be left well alone.”

“You are old, gnome, why do you care?”

“I care about this world. I care that it doesn’t *wither*.” Noranin clasped her hands in tight fists, her stubby fingers reddening with the pressure.

“Then you have nothing to fear from me,” Cohrven claimed.

Noranin shook her head. “It only has what power it is given. I fear what you might offer.”

“You think it’s real?” I interjected. Their conversation reminded me of my uncle when he spoke of Aurricc.

Cohrven opened his mouth, but Noranin spoke before he could. “It’s a foolish tale, only believed by the truly *desperate*.”

“What is it?”

“Enough!” Noranin shook her head. “No more talk of falsehoods.”

Cohrven looked at me intently, but I couldn’t read his expression. He moved to sit up, but grimaced and let out a loud gasp of pain, crumpling back to the bed.

“Don’t move,” Noranin ordered, as she hustled to grab a vial off a shelf in the corner. “Drink this.”

He took the vial from her and tilted his head up, draining it in one large gulp. Almost immediately, his expression turned serene.

He reached a hand towards me, and I flinched at the abruptness. He let it still for a moment, showing me that he meant no harm. I didn’t move as he kept reaching, eventually wrapping his fingers around the end of my braid, still stained red with his blood.

“Your hair is like the sun,” he mumbled, letting my braid slip through his fingers and returning his arm to the cot. Then he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, leaving me speechless for a long moment.

“I need to be alone,” I told Noranin, finally standing up and taking my eyes off Cohrven. “Is there a stream anywhere near?”

The trees would see me if I left Noranin’s cave, and whisper to Osreth. But the trees had already seen me, so my uncle already knew where I was, and he likely was on his way already. There was nothing I wanted more than to scrub the remnants of Cohrven’s blood from my skin, my hair. Even

though my hands were clean, I could still feel blood running hot beneath my palms, sticking my fingers together.

“Once you leave the front door, keep west.” Hesitation flashed across Noranin’s face, turning into resolve when she grabbed my arm. “The Nightheart is not yet healed, and his mind is unstable,” she said, remaining focused on his sleeping form. “Do not heed his ramblings.”

I nodded, unsure of whether to believe her after witnessing her and Cohrven’s fiery conversation, but choosing to appease her regardless.

As soon as I slipped out the wooden door and crawled through the tunnel hiding Noranin’s home, I spread my wings and flew past the trees, above the clouds. Below me, the world was soft and white. The sun shone brilliantly, beating down on me with comforting heat, and I closed my eyes, breathing in the fresh air, feeling my hair sway in the warm wind.

My peace didn’t last very long, however, as my thoughts inevitably turned to my uncle. I would have to be gone from the Sorcen Court long before he closed in on us. The reality that I had to leave my only home was only starting to sink in.

I had lost everything.

It wasn’t my fault, though that provided me with very little reassurance. Even if I hadn’t saved Cohrven, I would have been killed. Doing so just gave my uncle a convenient reason to murder me.

But I wouldn’t let him. I would win. I would return Cohrven to the Liral Court, stop the war, and then run to the ends of civilization.

The thought of never returning to Sorcen made my chest ache, but what was there to go home to? For my whole life, my existence had been a threat to my uncle. Now, he had finally figured out a convenient way to rid himself of me.

No wonder Ryena had always hated me—I was the spare princess. An obstruction to Erelie’s succession, a risk to her life. Osreth had been *allowing* me to live.

He had allowed me to spend most of my days flying instead

of being entrenched in court politics and mind-numbing lessons about healing and the history of magical theory. I had never been forced to spend time with the children of the nobility, like Erelie had been. I had thought myself lucky. Now I knew it was because Osreth hadn't planned on giving me a future, so he hadn't needed to prepare me for one.

Sadness clung to my skin, the marrow of my bones, as I sank through the clouds, searching for the stream, a compulsive need to cleanse Cohrven's blood from my skin overcoming my sorrow. Noranin had wiped most of it off, but I couldn't rid myself of the sensation of the sticky residue. His screams pierced my ears, his blood spurted from the slashes on his chest, and I couldn't do anything, couldn't fix my mistakes, couldn't save him.

A panic was rising in my chest again, but I fought it, choking down the bile that rose in my throat.

Below the tree canopy, I heard the gurgle of flowing water. Following the sound, I found the stream. Bright blue and sparkling in the sun, it was narrow and calm, but deep enough that I could wash myself thoroughly. I removed my tattered clothes and walked in, shivering at the cold but embracing the clarity it offered. With each step I felt more in control of myself.

I undid my braid and dunked my head under the frigid water, scrubbing the ends fiercely with my fingers. I scratched my fingernails across my skin and rubbed until I was red and raw, until, finally, I felt clean. Grabbing my dress off of the bank, I washed it as well as I could. Faded dirt and blood stains remained, mottling the light green fabric, and even when the dress was dry again I was sure it would still reek of sweat, but it was still an improvement.

I pulled myself out of the stream and slipped on the still-soaked dress. Once I flew back to Noranin's, I stripped out of it again, hung it up on a rickety chair in front of the fire in the tiny room with my bed, and wrapped myself in a large quilt as I waited for it to dry. I curled up in a large cushioned armchair and shut my eyes. My wet hair rested on my thighs and I distracted myself by playing with the ends, squeezing water

out and feeling it run down my fingers.

I wondered if Erelie had known. Had my cousin accepted my death? Had she fought against it, or had she hungered for it?

*No*, I reprimanded myself. She couldn't have known. I could never doubt her love.

Osreth would have kept it a secret. Erelie would have told me. If she had heard, she would have screamed and fought as hard as she could to keep me safe. Erelie was not Osreth. She was *nothing* like him.

It was hard to accept that my life had been fake. Even after everything, I still hoped that I would wake up in my room at the Sun Palace, and it would all fade into some half-remembered dream.

I had loved my life, and I had loved everyone in it.

Tears began to prick the corners of my eyes. I tried to blink them back, but they started trickling down my cheeks anyway. I wiped them away with a corner of the blanket, trying to be strong.

I couldn't cry. Not yet. I'd cry when I was across the ocean, in the human territories. I'd cry when I was free.

# Eight

I SAT BY the fire, staring into the flames, until Noranin stopped bustling about the living room. When I got up to check on my dress, it was dry. After putting it back on, I tiptoed into Cohrven's room. The fire was dying, but its low orange glow was strong enough that I could see.

He was asleep, but unlike before, it wasn't peaceful. His brow was wrinkled, and he was fidgeting. I bit back a scream when he started murmuring. The words were too low for me to understand anything, even when I leaned down to try and make them out. He let out a whimper, then a second one, and I decided to end his nightmares.

As soon as one of my fingertips touched his shoulder, he jolted awake and clamped his hand around my arm. I yelped at the sudden movement and tried to pull away, but his grip was steel. His alert eyes flashed up to my face and he frowned at my fearful expression before opening his fingers slowly and letting his hand fall, showing that he had truly meant no harm.

I stepped back, far out of his reach. My arm hurt, a bruise surely forming. I touched it and winced at the tenderness. I stared at the door, waiting for Noranin to come marching in after being woken by my squeal, but a moment passed and there was nothing but silence.

"You want to know about the Wither," Cohrven said, dragging my attention back to him.

"Yes," I whispered.

"It's an old, old story. From the beginning of time, the Wither has always *been*. When the gods were born and the world shifted into order, all of its chaos was gathered and packed into one corporeal form. There's a rhyme:

*"Wither, wither, whispers the bog*

*Wither, wither, croaks the frog*

*Your flesh will melt and you will rot*

*If you ask the Wither for that which you've sought  
But if you want, want more than your soul  
The Wither may grant your selfish goal  
Stay away, stay away, heed this advice  
For the Wither always takes its price."*

A chill ran up my spine. "So, the Wither can grant the wishes of fae, as long as they're greedy enough. If they're not, the Wither kills them." He nodded, and waited for me to continue. "And you think the Wither's real?"

"I *know* the Wither's real." His eyes bored into mine, daring me to challenge him.

"How?"

"Because my brother found it." I stopped breathing. As far as I knew, Cohrven only had one brother—the one that he'd put in the dirt nine years ago. *Why hadn't I brought my dagger with me?*

"You mean the brother that you...?" I couldn't finish my sentence—couldn't even look at him when I said it. The wall became captivating.

"He was gone for weeks." Cohrven ignored my question. "No one knew where he went. When he returned, he said he had been training, and it made sense. He was physically stronger, and the magic he could do was otherworldly. He performed feats he couldn't have dreamed of before. Even my father was amazed." He cleared his throat, the strain of so much talking making his voice quieter, rougher. "I know he went to see the Wither. He asked for power, and the Wither gave it to him."

I lost my reason and started considering it, curious about the possibility. "But that would mean that he wanted it more than anything... that he was so greedy for power that—"

"His greed doesn't matter." Cohrven clenched his jaw. "Do you understand what I want now? I need my wings healed. I need the Wither. I need you to help me. Your magic is exceptionally useful."

“The Wither might not even be real,” I countered. My goal was not to join Cohrven on a fool’s quest. It was to get him home.

“It is real.”

“Even if it was, why would I even want to help you?” I hadn’t forgotten the intensity in Noranin’s eyes as she confronted the Nightheart. “Noranin warned you against finding the Wither. She said she would *kill* you.”

“She just doesn’t kn—”

“She knows a lot more than you do,” I interrupted. “All I want is to return you to the Liral Court and prevent my uncle’s war. I don’t want to search for something that doesn’t even exist.”

He laughed, a mocking, brittle noise. “You think my father will call off his army once I’m back in Liral? You can hardly bear to *glance* at my wings—imagine what my father will do once he sees them. He’ll march into Sorcen as retaliation and he will decimate *everyone*. Your uncle has ensured that.”

“You’re wrong,” I said, even as fear crept into my skin. “There has to be ano—”

“No.” Cohrven pursed his lips and looked to the ground. “I know my father. There will be no compromise. Even now, with my kidnapping and presumed death, a part of him is glad King Osreth has given him an excuse to invade the Sorcen Court. Our army is larger, and we’re well prepared from listening to the prattling of Sorcen’s ambassadors, though Osreth surely thought he was gaining the upper hand through their incessant visits. My father’s been waiting. He just needed a reason. Now he has one.”

“What if the Wither kills you?” Surely he had to accept that it was a possible outcome.

“It won’t.” His dark eyes steeled with determination.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” he stated. “I would give *everything*.”

“Even if the Wither heals your wings, how do you know that



your father won't retaliate against Sorcen anyway?"

"I don't," he admitted. "But I will fight as hard as I can to stop him from doing so. He listens to me."

"That's not good enough." A half-promise with no guarantee.

"Not only will I work to stop Liral from going to war with Sorcen, but you will be a subject of the Liral Court and under the royal family's protection. You wouldn't have to cross the ocean to the human territories. You would be safe, and you could live anywhere—in the palace, in the city, or as far away from everyone as possible."

"I don't want to live in the Liral Court."

He lifted an eyebrow, but didn't show any offense otherwise. "Then isn't stopping the war enough of a reason? If you help me, you'll at least have a chance."

I grimaced as I conceded that he was right. "Fine. I'll help you heal your wings."

He smiled for the first time since I'd met him, and it was... distracting. I found myself staring at his face a little too long. His pupils still filled his irises, leaving me to wonder if he would even remember most of our conversation in the morning.

"We're leaving in two days," I said. "If you dare to break your word, you will live to regret it."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from the Kingsdaughter." Letting out an exhausted groan, he closed his eyes. "Now, let me sleep."

Once I reached my room, I flopped onto my bed. All I could do was stare at nothing as my mind churned. *The Wither. Liral. Home. Wings. Promise. War. Uncle. Nightheart. Brother. You will rot. Take its price.*

Soon, exhaustion set in and jumbled my thoughts even further. Through the noise, Cohrven cemented himself in my head. *The Nightheart. Prince of the Liral Court. Heir. Stabbed his brother to death when he was twelve years old. Not a*

*rumour. His wings ripping. His blood dripping and dripping and dripping.*

Why should I believe him when he said he would help me if I helped him? I didn't. Not truly.

He would kill me, probably, with a knife to the gut once he got what he wanted. So, why?

Because I wanted to stop my uncle's war, and I had to keep Erelie safe, and this was the only way to even come close to doing so. It was a risk. I would take it. But I would never trust the Nightheart, I promised myself. *Never.*



COHRVEN SLEPT THROUGH the next two days. Noranin said it was to be expected, and that he would wake soon enough, but I still worried we wouldn't be able to leave when I had planned. With every passing moment, my uncle and his soldiers were getting closer. I knew he was riding out into the forest to hear what the trees had to say to him. The deeper into the forest he ventured, the quicker they would be able to give him our precise location.

By the second day, I was ready to truss Cohrven up in a blanket and start dragging his unconscious body behind me.

Noranin didn't approve of that idea.

I tried to distract myself by foraging for supplies, but even then I spent most of my time in the sky, searching for any sign of Sorcen's army.

That evening, two sacks had been packed tight with food, water, blankets, and bandages. I sat on a chair in front of the roaring fire, sipping pine needle tea while Noranin brewed sweet-smelling concoctions on the kitchen counter behind me. Staring at the dancing flames helped to calm my mind, and I went over tomorrow's plan with a sense of clarity.

Cohrven and I would leave early in the morning, find clothes and horses at the Mayberry Inn, and then seek out the Wither, all while avoiding my uncle's soldiers. It wouldn't be

easy. The forest would whisper our every move to my uncle.

There would be no way to avoid nature, and my illusions wouldn't work on the trees. Anything we wanted to keep from him would have to be spoken as the faintest whisper. We would have to use the Crossover to even have a chance of escaping—my uncle's magic didn't work on trees outside of his court—but I didn't know if we were two miles away or two thousand.

"How are you, Allina?" Noranin sat down beside me, interrupting my thoughts. Powders stained her hands and forearms, and dark circles sat underneath her eyes.

"I'm fine." Her gaze softened and seemed to see right through my skin to the twisting maelstrom in my chest. She patted my hand with her own, her palms warm and dry.

"It's alright not to be." My bottom lip trembled. I tried to hold them back, but tears sprung to my eyes anyway.

Everything that had been distracting me disappeared, until I only had one thought left: *I'm not good enough.*

I had told myself that I wouldn't cry until I was long gone from Sorcen, but I wasn't that strong.

I bawled uncontrollably, like a toddler who had fallen and scraped their knee. I certainly felt like one. Except I had no parents to pick me up and hug me. I didn't have a father to whisper comforting words. I didn't have a mother to wipe away my tears. I only had Noranin, gripping my hand and holding on tight.

It was hard to know that I wasn't enough for my uncle. My whole life I had strived for his attention, his acceptance, his love, and it was all for nothing. I had never been good enough for him to truly love.

I wasn't even good enough for him to keep alive.

Fresh tears cascaded down my cheeks. *Not enough.* I had never been and never would be enough. And now I was a fugitive, running away from the one person I had thought loved me the most.

“Kingsdaughter,” Noranin said, “look at me.” I lifted my head and wiped my nose with the back of my hand, trying to focus on her blurry face. “Your uncle’s failings are not yours.”

“H-he wants to kill me,” I blubbered. “He doesn’t love me and I don’t know what I did.”

“There is nothing you could have done,” she said, patting my hand again. “There is nothing you could do. Sometimes the ones we love are who they are, and everyone around them can only do what they can.”

I sniffled. My tears were drying up, but the heaviness in my heart remained. “B-but he always said that—”

“I’ve lived a long time, Kingsdaughter. I’ve been breathing since your great-grandfather’s reign. I have met good fae. I have met bad fae. The good don’t sentence innocents to an undeserved death.”

She was right, though it didn’t make me feel any better.

I stared at the floor in silence, the last of my tears sliding down my cheeks and hitting the wooden floor, creating small, misshapen pools that reflected the firelight. If my uncle wasn’t good, and my father wasn’t good, then what would I become?

Noranin squeezed my hand one last time, then let go. “Kingsdaughter, never forget that you are more than your name.”

# Nine

THE NIGHTHEART WAS awake. His voice rumbled, reverberating through the door as I scrambled into my wrecked dress. Getting my clothes on without a maid was starting to become difficult; I caught the dress on my wings countless times before slipping them through the slits and tying the fabric into the right position. I left my gold jewelry lying on my cot, a gift for Noranin, even if she had little use for it.

I burst through the door, then stopped abruptly. Cohrven's bare chest was free of bandages, his skin unmarred. His gaze slid to me languidly, and I was taken aback as I noticed that his pupils no longer swallowed his eyes, their irises a dark brown. He sat at the dining table across from Noranin, lounging on one of her tiny chairs. There was something... *different* about him, but I wasn't sure what.

"Kingsdaughter," he said, tapping a finger against the table.

"Are you ready to leave?" I asked, not bothering with formalities.

He tilted his head to the side, scrutinizing me. "I think so."

I took a few steps closer, but every bone in my body rejected the movements. Every word he spoke, every twitch of his muscles, was a warning to stay away. Noranin's cautious eyes flicked between the both of us.

"Can the Kingsdaughter and I speak in private?" He looked at Noranin pointedly. She scowled, glaring at him so harshly I thought his wounds were going to bust open again from the heat of it, but she left.

I couldn't bring myself to move any closer to him.

Standing up, he rolled his shoulders, and I noticed how tall he was, how small he made me feel. His presence seemed to fill the entire room. He crossed his arms and continued observing me. What remained of his wings were tucked in—it was impossible to see the damage when they were folded

together behind his back, the impossibly-dark black blending each torn piece together, hiding the jagged edges.

“So, you’re going to help me get home?” he asked. His face looked like it had never worn a smile, his mouth a hard line, his eyes cold and disinterested.

“I am,” I confirmed, my voice shaking in slight hesitation. He seemed like a different fae today. “Where is Witherton?”

He blinked. “Witherton doesn’t exist. We’re going to Liral.”

*What?*

“But two nights ago, we just—”

“I was out of my mind after being heavily dosed with healing tonics,” he interrupted. “Whatever conversation we may have had, you can forget it ever happened.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said, wondering if I had gone mad. Our conversation had happened, and he was lucid the whole time. “What about your father, what will happen when he sees your wings?”

“He won’t see them,” he explained, “because you’re going to hide them. And yourself.”

“I never agreed to that. I can’t hide your wings for the rest of my life. That wasn’t our deal.”

“We’re going to the Liral Court,” he said, too calmly. “Witherton isn’t real.”

My anger was starting to override the instinctive warning in my head that was telling me to stay far away from the Nightheart. I stomped my foot against the floor, my voice climbing in volume. “We’re going to find the Wither. You did *not* lie to me the other night.”

“There is no Wither. We’re going to Liral,” he snarled. I stayed where I was, not backing down as his muscles went taut and his nostrils flared.

“I won’t help you unless the original terms of our deal remain,” I snarled back, past caring about the rumoured unrivalled power of the Nightheart and the destruction he

commanded.

“*We’re going to Liral.*” His emphasis left no room for argument. “After, you can prance across the ocean to the human territories and rot, for all I care.”

“Why would I help someone who lies to me?” I turned my back to him and began walking to the door, every instinct inside me screaming not to make myself so vulnerable.

“You will listen to me,” he said, his tone dangerous.

“I will not!” I shouted, pivoting back to him.

His eyes burned as he stared me down. “If you don’t, I will go to war. For my vengeance, I will personally turn your palace to rubble.”

My fingers itched to wrap around his neck and squeeze. “Or I could kill you, right now.” I grasped my dagger, showing him that it was not an idle threat.

“Then you would be killing your only chance to save your court.”

I could have screamed in frustration.

“Do you want your family to become *casualties of war?*” he taunted. “I’ll keep their wings as trophies.”

*Never.* I would never let *anyone* hurt Erelie.

I erupted and lunged at him with a feral yell, ready to smash my fist into his arrogant face. He didn’t move—didn’t even *try* to get out of my way. Furniture started rattling.

The rest felt like time had slowed, though it happened quicker than I could blink. I was flying forwards, my arm pulled back, primed to punch, then the kitchen drawers slammed open with a deafening clatter and Noranin’s knives began floating in the air.

Cohrven bared his teeth and they stabbed towards me as if they were arrows loosed from a bow. I changed my trajectory and dove out of the way, leaving an illusion in my place. The knives cut through it, twisted to where I was now visible, and flew at me again, like a swarm of angry wasps.

Cohrven remained motionless, his eyes following the knives as they followed me. I unsheathed my dagger and used it to deflect one of the knives, jumping over the couch and crouching behind it. Each time Cohrven's knives cut through one of my illusions, I created a new one to distract him.

After recovering my breath, I made copies of myself appear in every corner of the room. I leapt over the couch and charged at him along with my illusions. The knives split off, wrecking every single copy until there was only me. But I was enough.

The tip of my dagger poked into the soft flesh beneath his jaw, drawing a small trickle of blood. His knives hung above me in the air, a hair's breadth from my skin. We glared at each other, our snarling breaths mingling.

"My father needs to see that I'm alive as soon as possible," he said through gritted teeth, "or else he'll attack Sorcen before we have the chance to stop him. We have the provisions. Our army is ready."

I pursed my lips. "Why didn't you just tell me that?"

"I never have to explain my decisions," he said, frowning. Somehow, I refrained from stabbing him while he was distracted by self-reflection.

"Drop your knives," I ordered. They were suspended above me, glistening raindrops ready to fall. To my surprise, he flipped them up and over, making them land on the table in a neat pile. I let my dagger fall and took a step back. Blood smeared across his pale skin as he tried to wipe his neck clean.

The Nightheart could *control*. I folded my arms and absorbed what I had just experienced. When he said he could reduce the Sun Palace to rubble, I thought he was exaggerating, but, after witnessing his power, I believed him.

He had caused the palace to shake on Midsummer's Eve, while he was drugged and barely responsive. I shuddered at the memory. No wonder Osreth had been terrified. Throwing some knives around a room was probably easy for him. I couldn't even imagine the scope of his true power.

"How did my uncle ever capture you?" What was supposed



to be a private thought leaked through my lips.

His gaze darkened, and I tightened my grip on my dagger, but his shoulders only sagged. “I wondered that every single day.”

The door banged open and Noranin rushed through. “You need to go, *now*. King Osreth is less than a day’s ride away.”

I jumped into action, throwing a rucksack at Cohrven and slinging mine over my shoulder.

“He must be riding through the night.” I cursed myself for underestimating the whispers of the trees, absurdly grateful that Noranin’s magic had located him. I grabbed Cohrven’s forearm and pulled him towards the door.

“Wait.” He ripped from my grasp and ran to collect the knives from the table. “I need something to carry them.”

Noranin scrambled to her pantry and dumped out a bulging burlap sack. She threw the bag to Cohrven as potatoes rolled across the floor. The knives filed into the bag hilt-first.

Cohrven paused then, and dropped to one knee. “Noranin, you have my gratitude and that of the Royal Family of the Liral Court. Anything you ask for shall be provided to you.”

“All I ask is for you to hurry!” she urged. Then we were running. I shouted my thanks and goodbyes to Noranin from over my shoulder.

“Stay safe, Kingsdaughter,” she yelled, her voice fading. “Remember that you’re more.”

I vowed I would.

# Ten

I STUMBLED THROUGH the mossy undergrowth, my lack of coordination belying the fact that I had spent most of my life in the sky. Cohrven moved like he was actually running on air, the jangle of his knives the only sound he made.

The Mayberry Inn was deep in the forest, a halfway stopping point for many travelers making their way to either of Sorcen's coasts. Cohrven had evidently studied maps of Sorcen, given that he never veered off course once. I should have been grateful instead of unsettled—he would have to lead us to the Crossover anyway—but it bothered me that he knew so much of Sorcen and I knew so little of Liral.

If we kept our pace, we would arrive at the inn before nightfall. Even being so isolated, the inn was always busy, and I was sure that we would find suitable clothes and horses to steal. I was also sure that it would be easy.

Stealing should have felt wrong, but excitement coursed through me at the prospect of using my magic again. Of course, the trees would see, and they would whisper...

I tried not to think of Osreth. He was close. Too close. Reports of our every move would reach him before midday. I wished that I could burn every tree in the forest to the ground.

I tripped over a camouflaged root and ended up in a heap. Without stopping, Cohrven tugged me up and shoved me forwards. "Fly, Kingsdaughter. I can keep up."

I opened my wings and lifted off, staying just above the forest floor.

I led the way, dodging errant branches and ducking vines, grateful that we hadn't reached the tangled heart of the forest yet, impassable by all methods of travel but horse and foot. Behind me, Cohrven's knives were a constant chime, letting me know that he was still there. We travelled for a while, until the sun was high in the sky and my throat was parched.

Finally, I fluttered to the ground and came to a stop. Cohrven halted beside me, doubling over and panting in loud gasps. He had kept up, but even then, I doubted he was completely healed. Running for so long couldn't have been as easy as he made it seem.

I stretched my aching wings and sat against a tree. After taking out my waterskin and letting a few drops of warm water trickle into my mouth, I closed my eyes and leaned back against the rough bark. My rest didn't last long, however, and I opened my eyes when I heard the squeal of metal. Cohrven was playing with his knives, sending them circling in the air above him.

"Is floating little knives all that you can do?" It was time to see what else he was capable of. I kept a close watch on the weapons, ready to launch myself out of the way if he sent them flying at me.

His eyes narrowed as he took the bait. "No." For a moment, he stared and nothing happened. Then my arm moved by itself, lifting to stick up straight at my side. I cried out as it started twisting unnaturally, like I was stuck turning a doorknob that never stopped rotating.

My arm didn't respond when I tried to stop it from twisting—it wasn't mine any more. I tried to use my other hand to straighten it, but Cohrven's control was impenetrable. I stumbled up, gripping the tree bark to stay standing. I could feel pressure radiating up my shoulder, but it didn't hurt—*not yet*. He was going to snap my arm in half, and he was going to make it slow.

Cohrven was emotionless, his knives circling his face. I grunted in effort as I created an illusion. A shriek broke through the quiet, then a giant kyvre bludgeoned through the forest canopy and towards Cohrven, fanged beak open wide, talons red with blood. It cawed again and Cohrven's eyes widened in shock. He dove out of the way of its first approach.

He freed my arm and it flopped to my side. As I stumbled forward, cradling it against my chest, I made the kyvre charge again. As it barrelled down at us, Cohrven's knives stabbed

towards it, and then I saw nothing as he tackled me face-first into the ground, knocking the air from my lungs.

He pressed me into the hard earth, using his large body to protect mine.

And I *almost* felt bad.

His knives ripped through my illusion and it disappeared. After a tense moment, I felt his body shift against mine as he looked over his shoulder to see that the kyvre had disappeared.

He searched the trees, his brows furrowed in confusion, eyes constantly moving as he looked for any sign of my kyvre. When the realization dawned on him, he cursed and sunk his knives deep in the bark of a tree trunk. He stood and looked down at me, seething. “*You.*”

“Me.” I remained crumpled on the ground, dragging in shallow breaths. “Never again,” I threatened, my voice weak, but strong enough that he could hear it. “I will tear you apart.”

“You couldn’t,” he said and stomped out of my sight into the trees, knives following him. I massaged my arm, the blades of grass in front of my eyes coming in and out of focus.

The Nightheart was exactly what I expected him to be. I didn’t know if I was disappointed or relieved.

I waited for him to return and offer me an apology, but he never did. When I felt we were wasting too much time, I set out in the direction he had gone, using an illusion to conceal myself so that he didn’t sense me and take off again.

After a hundred or so paces, I heard the rush of a stream and followed the sound to its source. I found him there, wings flared, sitting on a rock and staring down at his reflection in the water. The tatters rustled in the light breeze.

I approached him, silent and invisible. When the point of my dagger parted his black hair and pricked the delicate skin of his neck, he flinched. I traced his spine with the cold metal.

“I could,” I said, letting my illusion slide. Our eyes met in the stream’s reflection. Removing my dagger, I stepped back. “We need to go.”

I threw his rucksack beside the rock and braced myself for his retaliation, but he only nodded, tucked his wings in, picked up his rucksack and his bag of knives, and waited for me to lead.

The forest canopy thinned as we approached the Mayberry Inn. The rest of our journey I had chanced nervously looking back at Cohrven every few moments, but he was always staring off into the trees with a placid expression.

By the time we heard a cacophony of voices and the shrill neighing of horses, I wasn't frantic with worry anymore, but I was still vigilantly aware of his movements. One suspicious action, and I was going to leave him to find his way back to Liral alone.

I dropped to the ground and held out an arm, indicating that we should stop. He swept his damp hair off his face and crossed his arms, waiting for me. The sun was starting to set, its brilliance shining through the trees and making me squint.

"We're now under an illusion," I whispered. "Do not let anyone touch you, or it will disappear."

He nodded in understanding.

"I'll be able to keep the illusion up for a while, but we should do everything as fast as possible so I don't risk draining my magic."

We walked right up to the inn, past unseeing fae and oblivious hounds. The Mayberry was three stories tall, its stone walls lined with creeping ivy and its roof freshly thatched. Soft, yellow light and upbeat music leaked through the open windows. My stomach growled when the scent of warm meat pies hit my nose.

The sizable yard, separated from the forest by a wooden fence, teemed with fae, stuffed wagons, and an assortment of farm animals. All of their gazes unknowingly passed right through us, but that didn't stop Cohrven from being on edge. His fingers stayed curled into fists, and he flinched every time someone strayed within ten paces of us. He constantly moved his head, looking back, to the side, up, down.

It got so distracting that I finally had to grab his arm. “They can’t see us. *Calm down.*”

All he did was frown and look at my hand with disdain. He shook it off and continued walking.

Once we slipped through the front door, already open to let in the evening breeze, we stayed tight to the wall. The inn was crowded, and the stairs were on the other side of the room. We would have to pass through a tight corridor created by the filled bar stools and overflowing tables. I didn’t know how we were going to get through without someone bumping into us.

Before I could consider alternatives, in the middle of the room, a large fae with a thick beard, bulging muscles, and orange wings bumped into a round table full of other similarly-large fae with ruddy faces, likely all reserve soldiers being called to Suntrul for my uncle’s war. It didn’t look like a serious altercation, until the fae’s hand jerked with purposeful speed and he swiped every full mug off the table with a thundering crash, his eyes wide with astonishment. His hand hadn’t been his own.

The fight broke out instantaneously. Fists flew and tables flipped, and any fae that got hit by flying chairs joined in, until there was a vicious brawl. In a matter of heartbeats, the inn had cleared out, with only the distracted brawlers, the panicking innkeeper, Cohrven, and myself left behind.

Cohrven blankly surveyed the violence he had caused, and we used his distraction to sneak upstairs. Under Cohrven’s command, every lock in the hallway opened with a chorus of clicks. I found some worn brown leather boots, already broken in and fit for travelling, a faded green linen shirt, and a pair of brown trousers that would fit a small man. It took a bit longer, but eventually we found a room that contained black tunics, black trousers, and black boots that would fit Cohrven’s large frame.

After packing the clothes in our rucksacks, sneaking back down and out was easy. The inn’s patrons had started to trickle back in, but the room was left in a state of chaos, with half-eaten food, shattered glass, and broken chairs littering the

floor. The innkeeper was bent over the bar with his head in his hands, his wings drooping. As we exited the inn, Cohrven ushered me out in front of him. Screams erupted from inside as chairs and tables righted themselves, and shattered plates and mugs stacked in a neat pile.

Cohrven didn't look back.

The stables were packed with horses and oxen. I found a dappled mare with a calm temperament, fourteen hands high and in good shape. As soon as he entered, Cohrven approached a tall bay mare with a white stripe falling from her forehead to her nose. She began snorting and stamping her hooves. From the corner of my eye, I saw him grin.

I expanded my illusion as Cohrven crept into the tack room and passed suitable gear for the horses out to me. The stable boys were preoccupied by their card game and uninterested in the loud clamour that Cohrven's mare made as he tried to saddle her. She reared and kicked the stall door, his pleading whispers only prompting her further agitation.

Rolling my eyes as my dappled mare, that I had decided to name "Apple", obediently opened her mouth and let me put the bit between her teeth, I wondered why he didn't just freeze his mount. But I supposed that wasn't the point of their battle. I sighed and looped the reins over Apple's head. If Cohrven's mare was too wild and riled Apple up, I would make him find a new horse. My riding skills did not extend to the control of angry animals.

I waited on Apple in the yard, not bothering to observe Cohrven's struggle, but unable to stop myself from listening in just the same. After some high-pitched whinnying and loud banging, he was finally able swing up onto the saddle. The mare galloped through the stable doors and immediately tried to buck him off. He handled her with skill, yanking the reins tight to his body so that her head stayed high and she couldn't buck again.

"We have to leave," I shouted. Apple was getting so restless I had to keep turning her in circles.

"Give me a moment." He grunted, fighting to keep his

balance when he released his hold and the mare tried to buck him off again. He used his reins to jerk her head to the side, and drove her in a tight circle, patting her neck with a hand and murmuring soothing words in her ear until she stopped moving.

Sweat coated his brow and he wiped it off with the back of his hand. When he loosened his grip on the reins, his mare stayed still. It wouldn't last, but at least he had control for the moment. Apple calmed down along with the other horse.

"If she's too wild, you'll have to choose another one." I petted the soft hair draped down Apple's neck. "Apple might throw me off."

He raised his dark brows. "You called your *dappled* mare, *Apple*?"

"It's a fine name," I said, and frowned at him. "What did you call yours? Something ridiculous, like *Biter*?"

"No," he scoffed. "I haven't even given her a name."

"Well, she's rude, stubborn, *and* bad-tempered." I paused for effect. "Maybe you should call her *Cohrven*."

I squeezed Apple's flanks and turned away from his stunned expression, smiling once he could only see the back of my head. My smile slipped as I saw a bearded man on horseback, garbed in shining golden armour and an emerald cloak, emerge from one of the many paths leading to the forest.

Osreth had arrived.



# Eleven

AT LEAST TWENTY guards fanned around Osreth, slowing from a hard gallop to a walk. They were focused on the inn, shouting amongst themselves. The wind whistled, leaves rustled, and I knew that the trees were speaking to my uncle.

His head snapped to the side. Green eyes met mine. The illusion broke, and still, I couldn't bring myself to move.

But it seemed my uncle couldn't either.

A strong urge to run to him came over me. I wanted to talk to him so badly. Couldn't it have all been one big misunderstanding? Couldn't I have been wrong?

Cohrven broke the tense moment by laughing. He tilted his head back and his shoulders shook, leaving the rest of us to wonder what was so funny. When he stopped, his mouth crooked up in an unhinged grin. His brown eyes were bright with elation.

"You only brought twenty, Blessedborn!" he shouted, the ground quaking. As quick as it had come, his smile disappeared and his face turned hard. "Do you really think I am so weak, even without my wings?"

Cohrven rode up behind me and slapped Apple's haunches with an open hand, sending her galloping. "Get out of here, Kingsdaughter."

I scrambled to stay in the saddle, gripping the saddle horn as she jolted forward. Somehow, I managed to keep the reins in my hands and my feet in the stirrups as she careened into the forest. Once I regained my balance, I halted Apple with one rough tug of my reins and turned her right back around.

Cohrven was a fool. His cuts may have healed, but the rest of his body hadn't recovered from losing so much blood. If he was trying to fight as intensely as he could before, he would tire too fast to finish this battle.

As soon as I crossed into the yard, a strong wind buffeted

me and threw me from Apple. She took off back into the forest with a terrified whinny as I clutched the ground. I chanced lifting my head and gasped. The inn and stables were standing, but the yard had been wrecked. Debris whipped through the air. Arrows, rope, and scraps of wood circled about the open space. I ducked my head as a fence post narrowly missed me.

In the center of it all was Cohrven, seated on his mare. She was standing so still I suspected he was using his magic on her. They were both completely untouched by the maelstrom surrounding them. The wind wasn't even moving Cohrven's hair.

As I watched, Osreth's soldiers fought against the wind, trying to dig their feet into the dirt to reach Cohrven. To their right, Cohrven snapped a tree in half, the trunk toppling over and crushing the three closest soldiers under its heavy weight.

Long wooden splinters hung in the air for a mere moment before Cohrven whisked them through the air and impaled eight other soldiers, blood dripping from where the sharp points emerged from their golden armour, their mouths contorted in silent screams. As he killed the soldiers with ruthless brutality, Cohrven remained fixated on my uncle, his enraged eyes never losing sight of his green cape and golden circlet.

One foolish soldier sent a stream of fire shooting at Cohrven while the rest rallied around my uncle and started to gallop back the way they had come. Without flinching, Cohrven stopped the fire a foot from his face. It hung there, the flames writhing and crackling. Then it died. As did the soldier, when invisible hands twisted his head to the side and snapped his neck.

All of it Cohrven did passionless, until the horse that my uncle was fleeing on froze mid-gallop. Then he turned feral and bared his teeth, grunting with effort. The horse's hooves left divots in the ground as Cohrven dragged it back towards him.

The wind dissipated.

My uncle leapt off his horse and took flight, only for

Cohrven to let the mount go and grab hold of Osreth, pulling him down to the ground ever so slowly. Osreth's arms and legs flailed, and his wings fluttered wildly as he screamed for help.

"Allina!" he begged. I moved involuntarily, then stopped myself. He was going to kill me. *He will kill me, once he gets the chance.* The thought kept my feet firmly planted.

Cohrven twisted that long green cape around Osreth's neck, strangling him with it and cutting his desperate pleas short. Osreth swivelled to face me, his scared eyes bulging, his face reddening. Flashes of him smiling came to me, and I remembered how happy we used to be.

When he laughed, he did it as loud as possible, with no concern for Ryena's frown. He would always find me crying in my room at night, would always hold me close and cheer me up with a story—usually the one about how when my parents met, my father flew into a tree trying to impress my mother. The memories shattered my resolve.

And I couldn't let Cohrven do it.

Through tears, I screamed, "Cohrven!"

The cape wound tighter.

"Cohrven, stop!"

He ignored me.

Then I was flying towards him, to break his focus, to do something, anything.

Before I could reach him, Cohrven's mare started stamping the ground and rolling her head. She went still. Then she started moving again, and she never stopped. Cohrven reached a hand towards my uncle as the cloak started unwinding.

"No!" Cohrven shouted.

His fingers grabbed at air as he tried to maintain his magic, even as he started convulsing on the saddle. Relief coursed through me. Coughing, my uncle started crawling to his guards, so weak he could only use his forearms to pull himself forward.

Cohrven made to swing his leg over and dismount, so that he could finish off my uncle with his bare hands. I caught him just before he tipped over and crashed to the ground, too frail to even hold himself up. My uncle's soldiers quickly figured out that Cohrven was no longer a danger, having drained his magic, and they were galloping towards Osreth again, so I sent up a fake wall of fire taller than the treetops to slow them down.

Horses screeched as they shied away from the fake flames. Strange, harsh sounds left my uncle's throat, and I realized that he was trying to speak—trying to tell his guards that it was only an illusion. The fire would disappear once my uncle touched it, or when he got his voice back, whichever happened sooner.

Cohrven's eyelids fluttered as he tried to keep them open. He wasn't unconscious, but he was weak. I straightened him and opened my wings, hopping up and flying to sit behind him. I moved his feet out of the stirrups and slid mine in, reached around his waist, grabbed the reins, and gave his mare a strong kick, guiding her down the forest path Apple had retreated to.

I had to stretch my neck to see over Cohrven's broad shoulders. "What are you doing?" he said once we entered the forest. Then after a laboured breath: "We have to go back. I have to—"

"Look at yourself." Anger crept into my voice. "You have no magic. You can't even sit up on your own."

"I can still kill him." His weak cough made me doubt that.

"Not before his soldiers skewer you."

"I'll kill them too."

"No, you won't. You *can't*." I squeezed his waist and he cried out in pain, proving my point. "In case it wasn't clear, you haven't completely recovered from almost bleeding to death."

"He'll just follow us," Cohrven argued. "I need to—"

"My uncle will be heading home," I assured him. Osreth's

mortality was his greatest vulnerability. “He won’t be joining in the hunt for us anymore either, for fear of dying, which gives us a better chance of getting to Liral alive.”

“I should have... I should have snapped his...” Cohrven slurred, letting the last of his strength go and sagging forward.

“You’ll have other chances.” I didn’t tell him that I wished for the opposite. I hoped that there never was another moment when the Nightheart was face-to-face with my uncle, because at that moment, my uncle would be rent limb from limb.

I drove the bay mare as hard as I could, only letting up when I found Apple. I tied a rope between Apple’s and the bay mare’s saddles, leaving Apple no choice but to gallop alongside us. Cohrven remained in a state of exhaustion—alert but not, in that space between sleeping and waking where he couldn’t keep his eyes open, couldn’t move his body, but was still vaguely aware of what was happening around him.

Gripping the reins until my fingers turned white, I couldn’t help my forearms from resting against Cohrven’s bare waist, nor my chest from moulding against his shirtless back. As I felt my flesh turn clammy from the contact, I regretted not taking the time to change into the stolen clothes while we had the opportunity. Touching him so intimately was unnerving, and even though I tried to focus on other things, knowing that the fae in my arms could kill as easily as breathing made my skin crawl.

After an unknown number of miles, the mare was too tired to travel any farther. White, frothy sweat covered her chest, and I grimaced with remorse, even though I didn’t have any other choice but to run her as hard as possible. Cool night air hit my skin as I dismounted and wiped my sticky forearms dry on my dress.

I helped Cohrven off the mare and left him lying on the ground while I tied the horses and started a small fire. The sun had long set, leaving the struggling flames as our only dim source of light, sheltered by another of my illusions.

“Monsters,” Cohrven groaned, as his eyes flickered open. “Can’t...fall...asleep...”

“There are very few monsters in Sorcen, and none of them live near here,” I assured him. “Sorcen’s not crawling with bloodthirsty creatures like *Liral*.”

Choosing to believe me, he grunted in acquiescence. By himself, he laboriously crawled to the pallet that I had spread out for him and curled up on his side, drifting off to sleep within moments.

He hadn’t even eaten. I shook my head, ripped a piece of bread off one of the loaves Noranin had baked for us, and devoured it along with a chunk of cheese. The light meal wasn’t very filling, but it was too dark for me to hunt. Tomorrow, I would catch some rabbits to cook over the fire. My stomach gurgled in anticipation.

I peered through the fire at Cohrven. With how he was sleeping, tucked into himself, he almost looked like a child. I pulled a thin blanket out of his rucksack and covered him with it, in case the night’s chill became cold enough to wake him.

Within view of the fire, I changed out of my dress and into the brown shirt and trousers I had found at the Mayberry. The trousers were loose, but with a leather belt tightened about my waist they fit well enough. Back on my pallet, I sat cross-legged and braided my hair, thinking of my uncle all the while.

I had sat in on countless numbers of Osreth’s strategy meetings. I knew him. He had rushed ahead with so few guards because I wasn’t a threat—Cohrven was, and he had assumed that Cohrven would be half-dead, if not a corpse.

In the depths of Sorcen’s forest, it would be almost impossible for Osreth’s soldiers to find us without his magic, so he led a small attack squad that allowed him to move quickly and commanded a larger portion of the army to follow behind him. They would be slower, but they could still reach him in a few days if he ever needed their support, and if he needed them sooner, other squads could break off and make their way to him faster.

Once he had learned from the trees that Cohrven was alive, we had been on a steady pace to escape him, so he had decided to forge ahead, assuming that Cohrven was still too injured to

do much harm. He had been horribly wrong. Because of his mistake, he was retreating to the Sun Palace, where he would be safe.

The soldiers that had been following him were probably going to be separated into smaller squads and sent after us. It wasn't that hard to predict where we were going to be. From the Mayberry Inn, we would be taking the shortest route to the Crossover, wherever it was. We would be hunted by Osreth's soldiers until we reached it.

At least they wouldn't be able to track us by flying. It would be impossible for anyone in the air to see through the dense foliage. We were so deep in the ancient forest that it would be difficult to even get from the sky to the ground without cutting through the branches above and risking torn wings.

I was afraid to go to sleep and lose hold of my illusion, even as my eyelids drooped and my limbs grew heavy. My uncle had betrayed me, his soldiers would kill me on sight, and even the fae lying so peacefully across from me could turn on me at any moment. Eventually, the warmth of the fire comforted me, but sleep never came.

# Twelve

I RETURNED FROM my morning bath in a nearby trickle of a stream to see that Cohrven had packed everything and saddled the horses. Squeezing water from the end of my braid, I watched him from behind as he hung from a branch, pulling his chin up and over it again and again, unaware of my presence. I couldn't help but admire his strength, the smooth ease of his movements. He was built for destruction.

When he had finished, he let go and dropped to the forest floor, flapping his wings to help him land softly. Of course, they couldn't do anything and he tumbled forward when his feet hit the ground hard. Once more, he moved his wings instinctively to use their resistance to keep him from falling over. The air went right through them and he ended up on his hands and knees.

Thinking he was alone, he held his head in his hands and bent over, his forehead grazing the sparse grass. His shoulders trembled and I felt a wave of sympathy. But when the trees started to shake, their leaves cascading to the ground like raindrops from a heavy storm, I decided to step forward.

"What's happening?" I asked, rustling the dead leaves underfoot.

Calmly, he stood, folded his wings, shrugged his stolen shirt on, and adjusted his mare's saddle straps without ever facing me. "Nothing. Let's go," he ordered, dark eyes purposely focused on the forest ahead, where low branches would catch on our clothing and tangled roots would slow our progress. I sneered at the back of his head before mounting Apple. He took off at a trot and I followed him closely.

That morning, after Cohrven had eaten half our rations voraciously, he informed me of the Crossover's location, not bothering to whisper, as my uncle already knew where it was located and our destination had never been a secret. The Crossover lay far to the west, high on a small mountain range that I had never seen before on any Sorcen map.



Afterwards, looking like he was about to strangle me, he had answered my questions about the Liral Court in clipped sentences.

Yes, Liral was the land of no daylight.

Yes, there was only ever dawn, dusk, and night.

Yes, there was still grass regardless.

No one drank blood to survive.

There were no fae-beasts, what was wrong with me?

After seeing his bewildered reaction to the more horrifying rumours, I didn't think he was lying. Soon I would find out for myself, anyway. We were set to make it to the mountains within a week, and once we made it into the Liral Court, it was extremely unlikely that my uncle's soldiers would follow us through the Crossover. Until we reached it, though, we would be running for our lives.

The next four days passed and Cohrven and I didn't say one word to each other, choosing instead to communicate somewhat ineffectively in passive-aggressive gestures and meaningful glares. I hunted rabbits, and Cohrven skinned and cooked them. We didn't do much except ride, eat, and sleep, and I barely slept anymore, choosing instead to maintain my illusion though the night. Though I didn't mind not having to speak to Cohrven, the silence left me with nothing to do but think.

Maybe that's why I didn't notice. My head was so clouded with thoughts of Erelie and Osreth that I barely paid attention to anything. I couldn't even muster up the effort to be angry at Cohrven anymore. So, while I stalked into the forest to begin my usual evening hunt, I didn't hear the branch crack or the bowstring being pulled back.

Something seized my braid and yanked it so violently I thought my hair would rip out of my scalp. Shrieking, I was hauled backwards into a hard chest just as an arrow stopped right where my head had been. Cohrven let go of my braid, turned the arrow around, and sent it back on the same trajectory. Someone grunted.

“To the horses,” Cohrven ordered, pushing me towards our camp. I hadn’t gone far—after five paces I spotted the fire pit, then after five more, I was standing over it. But the horses weren’t there.

“They’re gone,” I said in disbelief. Our attackers must have released them and sent them running. Cohrven let out a frustrated growl. From all sides, arrows shot towards us. I ducked, but Cohrven stopped every single one, treating them the same as the first and whisking them back towards the archers.

The forest rustled and ten golden-armoured fae on warhorses circled us, each with their swords drawn. Their faces looked vaguely familiar, like soldiers I had seen walking the halls but had never really paid attention to. Cohrven and I stood back-to-back, ready to fight.

“Stand down, Nightheart,” one with dark blue wings ordered. I couldn’t see Cohrven, but judging by his snarling, he had just bared his teeth at the soldier.

“Kingsdaughter, His Majesty has ordered us to bring you back, *dead or alive*,” Blue Wings said. Though I already knew Osreth didn’t care about my wellbeing any longer, the confirmation was like a stab to the gut. “Stand down.”

“No.” I blinked backed tears and growled like Cohrven. I would kill them. All of them.

“Uorolt,” commanded Blue Wings, annoyance coating his sharp tone, like he was displeased to exert further effort in our capture.

Then a blinding light was all I could see, stinging with its intensity. I closed my eyes and stumbled forward, sending an illusion of me in the opposite direction. Anticipating that Cohrven was experiencing the same blindness, I made an illusion of him as well and sent it in a random direction, hoping that it wasn’t the one he had actually gone.

The sound of metal on metal scraped my ears as Cohrven took control of his knives. I dropped to the ground and tucked in my wings just before he whisked them about the crowded

space.

The soldiers cursed and yelled. Soft thuds and a smatter of metallic clangs let me know most of the knives had found their targets.

I chanced opening my eyes again, and the light was gone. Cohrven was crouched behind me. My illusions of us had disappeared, and the soldiers were occupied by dodging his swivelling knives.

Horses were bleeding and bolting, but most of the soldiers had already dismounted. A body was already on the ground, her eye impaled by one of Cohrven's knives. I swallowed the bile rising in my throat and crawled to Cohrven. His forearm sported a shallow slice, and blood gushed from a cut at the very tip of his pointed ear, leaving a trail of red that tracked down his neck.

"Separate them," he ordered. "Use your magic. I don't know how, but—Agh!" Uorolt's light was back again, directing the sun's rays into our eyes.

I created an illusion just as light exploded across my vision. Loud howling provoked terror in the horses and the soldiers as black cravenwolves the size of ponies emerged from the depths of the forest, fangs bared and dripping red with fresh blood, nostrils spewing gray smoke.

"It's just an illusion," Blue Wings yelled. None of the soldiers' fear lessened. I opened my eyes and the blinding light was gone as Uorolt focused on the more immediate threat.

"It's not real," Blue Wings explained, waving his arms. "The Kingsdaughter can create illusions. That's how she helped the Nighthart escape."

I cursed under my breath as the soldiers began to regroup, convinced by Blue Wing's reasoning, but I wasn't done yet. One more cravenwolf emerged from the forest with a struggling, keening rabbit trapped in its maw. When it bit down, the rabbit squealed before being torn apart, both halves dropping to the forest floor with a light rustle of grass.

One soldier broke. "The Liral beasts have come to find the

Nightheart! They'll kill us!"

Fear soon won out over reason. Blue Wings ran in one direction as the cravenwolf pounced at him, and the remaining soldiers scattered in the opposite direction as the rest of my imaginary pack hunted them.

Cohrven sprang up, his knives following him. "Kill the leader. I'll take care of the rest."

"I will."

Though I tried to sound strong, he heard the tremor in my voice. "It has to be done, Kingsdaughter." Cohrven's knives circled him, reminding me of the dagger hanging heavy by my side. "He can't escape."

Then he sprinted after the eight others, leaving me alone.

I took a deep breath and remembered Blue Wings saying that my uncle didn't care if they brought me back to him as a corpse or not. I clenched my dagger tight as I ran through the trees, the leather binding digging into my palm.

In the depths of the forest, I could barely see Blue Wings. But I caught up as I made my cravenwolf herd him back towards me, fade into the trees, and, finally, disappear, making him think he had escaped it.

Right in front of me, Blue Wings hunched over and dragged in air, looking over his shoulder all the while.

Of course, his vigilance didn't matter. Because he couldn't see me anyway.

I came up behind him, dagger poised. All it would take was a slice across the throat. It would be just like killing the kyvre. But as he stood, my hand still shook.

It was time. I *had to*. If I didn't, he would run. He would tell my uncle where we were, they would learn what my illusions could do, and they would hunt us *relentlessly*.

I dragged my dagger across the front of his neck. He screamed and lurched forward, breaking out into a run, his hands clutching his bleeding throat. The violent trembling in my fingers shook the dagger loose from my hand.

I hadn't cut deep enough.

Struggling to stand, I picked up my dagger and made the cravenwolf jump out in front of Blue Wings, its teeth bared in feral aggression. Driven by fear and confusion, Blue Wings changed his path and ran right back towards me, his eyes wild with panic, blood dripping through his clenched fingers.

I tripped him and he crashed to the ground.

Nausea roiled through me, but I reached down anyway as he struggled to get up. My dagger grazed bone as I put all my strength into opening his windpipe. Warm blood sprayed my fingers, the grass. His choking sounds let me know that I had done it well.

He rolled onto his back, blood gushing from his neck. When he tried to speak, it was a gurgle and a rush of red. Hatred filled his eyes, even as he died, and my guilt quickly turned to anger.

He would have gladly killed me. I was a filthy traitor to my uncle and his soldiers. There was nothing to mourn.

"You're the first fae I've ever killed," I told him, wiping my hand and my dagger clean on the grass. If my uncle's soldiers kept hunting me, he wouldn't be the last.

The hatred burning in his eyes dissipated as they glazed over, and it was done.

It took too long for me to walk back to the camp. Every step I took was forced. My legs didn't want to obey. Cohrven wasn't there when I reached it, and I steadily ignored the dead soldier's body. All I wanted to do was collapse.

But Cohrven could be in trouble. He could have been captured. He could have drained his magic. He could have fainted. I jogged in the direction he had gone. The forest was too silent. The only sounds were the thumps of my feet as I clomped through the undergrowth.

I halted when the coppery scent of blood hit my nose. Studying the ground, I noticed red sprinkled across the dirt. Then I tilted my head up slowly.

Cohrven yelled from off to the side, his voice cracking, “Allina, don’t look!”

He slammed into me, an arm going around my shoulders, a hand grabbing the back of my head and pressing my face to his chest.

But I had seen it all.

Mutilated bodies littered the ground. Wings torn from shoulders were stabbed through branches, hanging on trees like decorations.

It was the work of a monster.

I couldn’t feel my legs. My head felt like it was floating. The visual of blood spraying from Blue Wing’s throat played through my mind. My hand was still sticky with it. The world spun and bile rose in my throat.

I vomited on Cohrven’s chest.

He merely stepped back, holding my braid out of the way as I leaned over and emptied the rest of my stomach onto his boots. I stumbled back from him when I was done, my eyes watering.

“How could you?” Each step I took backwards, he followed with one of his own, using his body to shield my eyes from the gruesome sight behind him. “My subjects will think I’m a monster.”

“No,” he said, “they’ll think *I*’m a monster.”

“Because you are!” I shouted, spitting on the ground, trying to get the sour taste of vomit out of my mouth.

“They were already dead when I did it,” Cohrven explained, as if I would listen to him. “I gave them instant, painless deaths.”

“I don’t care,” I yelled. Torn wings danced behind my eyes. “Why would y—”

“Because I’m going to live,” he stated, “and to make that happen, I’m willing to do more than desecrate a few corpses. When the other soldiers see these bodies, do you think they’ll

want to chase after us? Or will they want to turn around and run crying back to your uncle?"

I couldn't bring myself to reply, so he continued. "I'm sorry I let you see this. I didn't want you to."

It was horrible. So horrible my stomach was still churning. But the Nightheart was right. The fae of Sorcen would want me hanged for this slaughter, but he was right. If I wanted to survive, I had to accept that it wouldn't be honourable.

"I found two of their horses. I'll bring them to camp," Cohrven said, knowing from my silence that he had made his point effectively. "Go ahead and pack."

By the time Cohrven returned, I was waiting for him. He carefully removed his vomit-stained shirt and discarded it on the ground, pulling on a clean one. Luckily for him, I had missed his trousers. He cleaned his boots by scraping them against some bark.

The war horses that he had caught were large and strong-willed. No wounds from Cohrven's knives marred their flesh, so I assumed that's why he had chosen them. I blanched as I imagined riding one. It would control me more than I could control it.

I stood as Cohrven strapped two sword belts around his hips in quick, practiced movements. He slid a gleaming broadsword into each scabbard, then he looked at me and I realized that I had been staring.

"You never asked if I killed him," I said, my eyes meeting the bloody dirt in front of my feet.

"I never doubted you."

"It was bad." I tried to stop my voice from wavering, but failed. My arm felt sticky again. I raised it and observed the smudges of blood that I hadn't been able to completely wipe off.

"First kills always are." His voice seemed to soften, only to harden back to his usual harsh tone when he said, "You can sob into your blanket later. But now, we have to leave."

I wiped my eyes and vanquished budding tears, then lifted my head to see that Cohrven was already swinging onto the saddle of the bigger white stallion. I trudged over to the black one that remained, wishing Apple well in her newfound freedom, and dragged myself up through sheer force of will.

Cohrven must have adjusted the stirrups, because my boots fit into them snugly, my legs at a comfortable height. I appreciated it, but I would never tell him that. Hunched over from exhaustion, I followed him.



# Thirteen

I LURCHED THROUGH the forest, searching for any source of water. Even a puddle would do, my mouth dry with thirst. Not to be outdone, my stomach growled, the pangs of hunger hard to ignore. The small slice of cheese I had eaten hadn't been nearly enough to curb my appetite. I had slept in far past dawn, and when I had woken up Cohrven was nowhere to be seen.

I heard the rush of water and hurried towards the sound. Shadowed by a thick canopy of trees above, the stream was wide enough for me to swim across, and more than adequate to bathe in. In my haste, I almost trampled on a pile of black clothes, and my sleep-deprived brain was slow to understand why they were there.

Then I saw him and forgot how to move.

He swept his drenched hair out of his face, tilting his head back, towards the sun's warm rays. My eyes caught the movement and followed his hand as it trailed along the black strands plastered to his neck, then fell back to the water.

The hard muscles of his abdomen glistened. Droplets fell along the ridges, leading my gaze downwards, to where the prominent lines of his hips angled below the stream. His lower half was mercifully concealed, but I could imagine what lay beneath the surface.

I dragged my eyes to his.

He was staring up at me through his lashes, his mouth set in a hard line and his expression almost hostile in its severity. But something simmered in his eyes—something that wasn't anger or resentment. Something *hungry*.

A slight tilt of his head. A question, maybe. Or an *invitation*.

*He was so beautiful.* I thought it. I flew.

Until my throat tasted like copper, I flew. When I was far enough upstream, I collapsed to my knees on the ground and

panted as I caught my breath.

I wasn't strong enough to stop thinking of the heat in his gaze. I wasn't good enough to stop wanting to trace the paths of those droplets with my hands, my tongue.

I was awakening. But it wasn't a soft, gentle blooming. Desire ripped through me, raw and demanding, until only instinct remained.

I had to have him.

I would kill to have him.

I dug my fingernails into the dirt, anchoring myself in place. The cool soil grounded me, and not long after, the blistering want coursing through my veins receded.

The frigid stream was my penance. I scrubbed my arm until there was no bloody residue remaining, then stayed in the water until my fingers were numb. My stomach was in knots as I made my way back to the camp.

Cohrven was evil. He had killed his brother in cold blood. He could rip apart bodies like they were rotted wood. I should think he was the ugliest person in the world.

Of course Cohrven was waiting for me—fully clothed and leaning against a tree, dark hair still dripping water, the ends curling loosely against the nape of his neck. I swallowed and ignored him, trying to make my mind go blank. Stubbornly, I avoided looking in his direction while I rolled up my pallet and forced my blanket into my rucksack.

“What is it?” he asked.

I continued ignoring him.

“What's wrong?”

*Everything.*

I chose to deflect. “I killed someone yesterday. Maybe that could be what's wrong with me. Are you willfully ignorant? Or are you just oblivious?”

“I was just...” His deepening voice was full of frustration. “You can talk to me about it, if it bothers you that much.”

“I don’t want to talk to you about anything.”

He leaned forward, covering his mouth with a hand. His wet hair brushed my cheek, leaving my skin tingling.

“That’s a shame, because I was going to explain how my magic works,” he whispered, his breath fanning over the tip of my ear. In my head, I cursed him, then myself.

“Fine,” I whispered back.

He tilted his head, narrowed his eyes. “Fine, what?” His breaths hit my ear again, sending shivers up my spine. “I couldn’t hear the rest.”

I sighed. “Fine, please tell me how your magic works.”

“Sit.” I sat in the middle of the clearing, as far as possible from the trees, and he sat right beside me, leaving a small space between our thighs. I swore I could feel the heat radiating from him. “Very few others know this information. If you tell anyone, I will make sure you will never be able to do so again.”

I glared at him. Unbothered, he continued, whispering into my ear. “I can control objects and the elements. That’s easy. I can also control living creatures. That’s not so easy. In fact, it’s very, very difficult for me to do for any amount of time.”

“And you don’t want anyone to know that you have a hard time doing anything,” I deadpanned.

“You could say that,” he said, acknowledging my interruption, then continued. “An object, an element, doesn’t have a will. A living creature does. If they try hard enough, even with all of my magic focused on them, they can break my hold. Usually, they don’t realize that it’s even possible. Their mind is so overwhelmed by fear they can’t think about anything else.”

I thought back to when Cohrven had twisted my arm against my will. I *had* been frozen, not only by him, but also by my own terror.

“So, if I control them, I have to kill or disable them as quick as possible,” he explained. “Holding one living creature is

draining, holding multiple incredibly so.”

“Why would you tell me this?” Having anyone know the limits of his power, and to be able to exploit those limits, was extremely dangerous for him.

“Until I heal fully, there’s going to be more situations where I push past what I can realistically handle. You need to know my limits; you need to recognize when I’m going to go down, especially when we’re fighting.”

I nodded in understanding.

“I didn’t take hold of those soldiers yesterday because I wasn’t sure that I could kill them all without fainting.” His whispers grew quieter...sadder. “I’m sorry that it forced you into taking a life.”

“It was either him or us. I’ll have to get used to it.” I studied the weaving of my trousers, dragging my fingernails along the rough linen.

“Never get used to killing. If you do, you’re lost.” I looked up and his eyes were hard again. The words didn’t seem right coming from someone who had started so young.

“You’re used to killing,” I accused, my voice returning to a normal volume. His brow furrowed slightly.

“And what does that tell you?” I understood the implication and stayed silent.

Wanting to indicate that our conversation was over, I tried to focus on braiding my hair. Cohrven took the hint and moved away from me, but not far enough. I separated my hair into three strands and braided them together with practiced speed, gathering more hair as I went, until I accidentally pulled a strand too tight and winced from the pain. Under Cohrven’s scrutiny, I feigned coolness and tried again, but failed to keep my whine of distress quiet.

“Are you alright?” he murmured. I could feel his eyes sweeping across my face and hardened my expression. I wouldn’t allow him to care about how I felt. To be tender.

“My scalp hurts a little. Nothing I can’t deal with.”

Something like guilt might have flickered across his face. He had saved my life by yanking my braid. He didn't have to feel bad about that.

But he shifted to kneel in front of me, then reached out with both hands. I flinched and he stopped, hands motionless. "I'm not going to rip your head from your shoulders, or whatever you're thinking."

I gave him a wary look, then let him place his hands on each side of my head. Shivering at the sensation, I relaxed into his touch. His magic flowed into me and I startled, my eyes opening wide and my jaw dropping. "You can heal."

He didn't reply—only gazed at me intently, his brown eyes soft, gleaming with the early morning light. Within a few heartbeats, his magic dissipated. When he gently tugged my hair, it didn't hurt anymore. Lips quirking up in a tiny smile, he dropped his hands back to his lap.

He was slightly mesmerizing when he was kind. I scrambled up after spending far too long gawking at his handsome face. I couldn't think that. I wouldn't. When I was at the edge of the clearing, I finally allowed myself to take a breath.

"You're disgusted by me." Cohrven's tone cut through me like a razor. He wasn't wrong.

I didn't respond to his accusation, even as my hands tightened into fists.

"Why?" he asked.

All I could do was let the truth tumble from my tongue. "You're from the Liral Court," I spat. "You stabbed your brother to death when you were a *child*. You attacked me with knives. You were going to *break my arm* just because you could."

"I would *never* have cut you with those knives," he stated. "I was *not* going to break your arm."

I scoffed. "As if I'd believe that."

"It's true!" His voice cracked into a higher pitch. "Was I trying to scare you? *Yes*. Was I trying to harm you? *No*."

“That doesn’t make it any better! I’m already scared of you. How could I not be? You’re the *Nightheart*.”

His expression went flat.

“And you’re the *Kingsdaughter*,” he goaded. “Do you know what they say about you in Liral? *No*?”

Despite my anger, my stomach dropped.

“In Liral, they snicker and call you the *Madkingsdaughter*.” He gloated at my stricken expression. “It’s long, I know, but it just seems to fit the stories. Even Sorcen soldiers use the title.”

“You’re lying,” I accused, but I knew he wasn’t. He wanted to hurt me, and nothing was crueller than truths better left unsaid.

His upper lip curled into a sneer. “They say you should have been culled by your uncle when he came to power—that it’s only a matter of time until the madness that claimed your father claims you. After all, why would you still be called the *Kingsdaughter* if it wasn’t a warning?”

“That, that...” My voice broke as I took in shallow, stuttering breaths. “That can’t be true.” It came out even quieter than I felt.

The weight of the knowledge that absolutely nothing in my life had been genuine was crushing me. I wanted it to. I wanted to disappear. I wanted to go back to when I was ignorant. I wanted to forget everything.

“I hate you!” I yelled, tears blurring my vision. “I wish I had let you die!”

“We should get going.” He brushed my words off like they were nothing. They probably *were* nothing to him. “We’ve spent long enough here.”

I didn’t know what he was expecting me to do—listen to him and jump on my horse? Yell at him some more?

I dropped to the ground, held my head in my hands, and screamed. I had tried to stay strong. I had tried so hard.

Everyone that I thought had loved me had been lying to me.

To them, I didn't matter. I never had. I never would.

"If you're going to sit there and cry all day, then I won't stop you," Cohrven said. "But words are just words. I've had to learn that, and so will you."

I glared up at him through eyes swollen with tears. "You're horrible," I growled. "You deserve everything you've wrought."

"Get up, Allina," he said. I had to find a reason to. Right then, if I got up, it was because I hated the world more than I hated myself. That wasn't good enough for me.

I thought of Noranin. She didn't think I carried my father's madness within me. I thought of Erelie—my little cousin, my best friend. If I gave up, Liral would go to war with Sorcen. Erelie would die. As the Sorcen heir, she would be executed, and I would have done nothing to prevent her death.

It was enough to make me stand and wipe my eyes dry. Brushing past Cohrven as if he wasn't there, I tied up my rucksack and seated myself on my black stallion. Cohrven followed, pulling himself up onto his horse.

As we started forward, Cohrven had the last word, weariness coating his gravelly voice. "Think of all that I could do, Kingsdaughter." A deliberate pause. "Then think of all that I don't."

# Fourteen

YOU SHOULD HOLD my hand,” Cohrven said, finally breaking our tense three-day silence. I looked at his offered palm with revulsion. If he noticed my disgust, he didn’t show any recognition.

“No.”

He huffed in frustration as I peered back into the blackness of the tunnel. After three days of riding, we had reached... one rather short mountain. A hill, really.

“This is the Crossover?” It was nondescript, and nothing like I had ever imagined. Patches of long grass and lifeless dirt covered the mountain, with no traces of magic or grand columns to be found.

“Of course not,” Cohrven said, as if that was so obvious. “Going to the Crossover would be too dangerous. Your uncle would have had soldiers fly there already.”

“Then where are we?” Though I tried to muster up some anger, I couldn’t fault him for lying to me. The trees were reporting our every move to my uncle, and some unpredictability was useful.

“Another way.”

“How does this lead to the Liral Court?” We were still in the middle of Sorcen, and all I could see was a hole in the side of a not-so-impressive mountain.

“It leads to the Bonebright Mountains. They sit close to my home,” he said, ignoring my question. “Halfway through, you’ll feel the shift.”

I had a dozen more questions, but didn’t waste my time trying to badger him for answers that would not be forthcoming. Cohrven wanted to return to Liral. If this was the best way to get there, I believed him.

Our horses wouldn’t fit in the narrow space, so we freed



them. Rucksacks slung over our shoulders, we stood in front of the tunnel, awkwardly avoiding looking at one another. As much as I had tried to forget all that Cohrven had said, his words played in my mind over and over again.

*Madkingsdaughter.*

Every step I took, I was closer to breaking down and giving up.

“Just grab onto my bag, and hold tight. We won’t be able to see anything once we get in deep enough.”

Grudgingly, I reached out and fisted a hand in the rough linen of his rucksack. He stared at me instead of moving. “Let’s go,” I prompted.

With a frown, he entered the tunnel. The trek was twenty miles long and Cohrven admitted that he didn’t know what we could encounter inside. Hopefully, nothing would be slinking in the darkness.

The walk was tedious. With no source of light, there was only suffocating black. I couldn’t see Cohrven in front of me, but I could hear his feet tapping against the stone alongside mine.

Time seemed to fade with the darkness. Our footsteps echoed off the stone walls, and I startled whenever we kicked a stray stone that clattered along the ground and turned into a jarring cacophony. My exhales were harsh and loud in the oppressive silence, but I couldn’t even hear Cohrven breathe. He must have been focused on listening, relying on his ears when his eyes were useless.

I felt the switch, just as Cohrven said I would. A cool breeze slithered up my spine, and a wave of pressure made my ears pop, but that was all. Liral didn’t feel so different from Sorcen.

My legs tired slowly, but after untold miles, my calves began to burn with each step. My fingers, still clutching Cohrven’s rucksack, were stiff and cramped, and I didn’t even know how much distance was left.

A sharp ache spiked through my fingertips from gripping the rucksack so hard, but I feared loosening them. I didn’t want to

be alone. I didn't want to get lost. I didn't want to lose Cohrven.

After what felt like forever, a far-off orange light appeared in my vision. I sighed in relief and walked faster, spurred on by the visible end.

The tunnel started to shake lightly, the vibrations starting in my feet and reverberating up to my teeth. Thick dust and tiny pieces of stone dislodged from the ceiling.

"Stop it, Cohrven." I spat out the dust coating my lips and wiped my eyelids clean, mixing dust with sweat.

"It's not me." For the very first time, I heard fear laced in his voice. "Your uncle's smarter than I thought."

The mountain shifted, spears of rock breaking through the walls of the tunnel. A chill travelled down my spine as Cohrven shouted, "Run!"

As we sprinted towards the light, Cohrven's silhouette pulled away from me. I pushed myself hard, trying to catch up to him, when an armoured hand reached out of the cave wall and grabbed my wrist.

I screamed, the sound deafening as it echoed through the tunnel. Wrenching my wrist free, I ran without looking back. Cohrven was already making his way to me, but I waved him forward.

The dim light was so close. I could see the grass at the mouth of the tunnel. Then an arm emerged from the wall again, catching my throat in the crook of its elbow. I choked on another scream. A soldier gilded in golden armour stepped out of the solid stone and started dragging me backwards, strangling me with his arm bent around my neck.

Cohrven reached the end of the tunnel, but as he turned to look for me, one of Osreth's soldiers came up behind him. My heart stopped, then started racing when Cohrven narrowly dodged a swing of the soldier's sword, unsheathed one of his own, and stabbed the soldier through the underarm.

I moved to throw the soldier choking me back against the stone, to smash the back of his head into the hard wall, but he

melted into it like it was water. My lungs burned as I grabbed my dagger, turned it in my hand, and stabbed backwards. Chainmail and plate armour covered his entire body, but the soft skin of his neck, just below his jaw, was vulnerable.

He screamed and loosened his grip as my dagger bit deep into his neck. Lunging forward, I freed myself from his grasp and rushed towards the light, coughing up spit and dragging in air.

The ceiling caved in behind me—the last, desperate act of a dying soldier—and I couldn't run fast enough. The soldier materialized out of the cave wall again, blood dripping from his throat and washing over the front of his chest plate, and caught my wrist, holding my arm straight out. I heard the crack of bone as he twisted my arm and slammed it into the rock wall at an unnatural angle, forcing me to the ground as pain overwhelmed the strength of my legs.

I cried as pure agony radiated from the break, spreading down to my fingertips, up to my shoulder. With all the effort I had left, I dragged my arm to my chest, screaming at every slight movement. Above me, the soldier wobbled on his feet. I lunged upwards and used my shoulder to check him through the stone wall, leaving him to bleed out inside the mountain.

Cohrven wasn't helping. He was a motionless silhouette at the tunnel opening as he watched me stumble towards him. Then I looked up.

Large chunks of stone were suspended in the air above my head. I should have already been crushed.

Cohrven was holding up a mountain. For *me*.

My broken arm flopped against my chest as I pushed my body to the limit. One more step. Another.

I was almost there. I could see Cohrven's heaving chest, his anguish.

I dove into the light and ended up at his feet. He let the tunnel collapse in a thundering of carnage, grabbed the back of my shirt, and hauled me past five dead soldiers. Boulders the size of houses tumbled down the side of the mountain as he

fled, landing right where we had been moments before.

The tremors subsided when we were far from the rampaging path of the boulders. After carefully placing me on the ground and letting go of my shirt, Cohrven fell to his knees and slumped onto his side. Heavy breaths wracked his chest, his gasps for air audible. I clutched my arm and shuffled over to him. Barely-open eyes told me he was going to faint soon.

He clamped his hands around my broken arm before I had a chance to dodge him. I hollered at the pressure, then realized what he was planning.

“Don’t, Cohrven.” I tried to use my other hand to pry his fingers off, but his grip was solid. “Don’t.”

“*Let me,*” he said, through clenched teeth. I couldn’t stop him, and his magic knitted the bone in my arm together again. When his hands went limp, I knew he had faded into unconsciousness. I moved my arm and the pain was gone.

There was nothing for me to do but wait until he woke up. It didn’t take much of my magic to make us invisible, in case there were more soldiers lurking about. I dug through my rucksack and covered him with a blanket. The sun hung low as I took to the sky for my first glimpse of Liral.

The Bonebright Mountains were named appropriately—tall, sharp, white mountains with jagged peaks extended to the sky, some reaching past the clouds. The mountain from which we had emerged was now sunken-in, turned into a misshapen pile of rubble.

There was nothing else remarkable about the landscape. We were on the edge of a forest of pines that stretched past the horizon. They were short and thin due to the low-light conditions, but they could still grow. I hadn’t been expecting a barren, scarred wasteland, but I had been expecting something *different*. If I didn’t know I was in Liral, I would have thought I was in one of Sorcen’s northern forests.

I returned to the ground, too nervous to leave Cohrven alone for long. Thanks to the parched trees, I started a crackling fire that gave off dim light, fighting the smothering darkness. I sat

on the ground, wrapped up tight in my blanket, but cool air still leaked through the threads.

Compulsively, my gaze moved from the fire to Cohrven, then back again. I told myself that he wasn't going to die—that he was just sleeping—but every few moments I had to check that his chest was still moving.

He stretched out his arm in his sleep, sticking a hand out from underneath the blanket. I watched him for a moment, then returned to my thoughts. I was supposed to be sad, about my uncle, about being the *Madkingsdaughter*, but I couldn't feel it lurking inside me anymore. I didn't know what had changed.

Why should I care what anyone thought of me? Like Cohrven had said, words were just words. I knew who I was.

Osreth didn't care about me, so why should I care about him? He tried to have me killed again, tracking us so closely his soldiers had time to plan a surprise attack on Liral territory.

There would be rampant rumours circulating in Sorcen. Rumours of how the Kingsdaughter had murdered innocents with the Nightheart. Rumours that I was a traitor aiding Liral. If my subjects chose to believe the lies, they could. If my uncle chose to smear my name for the sake of his war, he could.

I was never going back.

I would save Erelie. Then I never wanted to hear of Sorcen again.

# Fifteen

EMBERS SCATTERED INTO the air and floated back to the ground harmlessly as I threw a few more sticks onto the dying fire. The temperature was dropping, and I huddled with my head to my chest. When I started to shiver, I was drawn to Cohrven's uncovered hand. After crawling to him, I grabbed his hand to stick it back under his blanket, but his fingers were ice.

Making sure that he was still sleeping, I clasped his hand between both of my warm ones, brushing a thumb over his knuckles. I turned it over and traced from his palm to his fingertips. His hands were close to twice the size of mine, studded with hard calluses built up from years of fighting.

Sometimes it was too easy to forget what he was—what all he had done. The fact he could heal contradicted everything I had believed about him. It was laughable that his hands could save what they had broken—what they had yearned to break.

I trailed a fingertip along the lines of his palm. How many lives had this hand ended? How many lives had it preserved? Did the answer to the last question even matter?

This was the hand he had used to murder his brother. These fingers had gripped the dagger, this wrist had plunged it deep into his brother's flesh.

I threw his hand underneath the blanket and moved to the other side of the fire. He had spilled so much blood. His healing couldn't redeem him. Nothing could.

*Can nothing redeem you, then?* In my head, I watched myself from a distance as I sliced Blue Wing's throat. I saw myself in the tunnel, stabbing the Stonewalker in the neck. Blood coated my hands, just like it coated his.

And there would be more to come. I was just a hypocrite.

But I imagined myself at twelve. I couldn't even bring myself to hit Erelie when I was furious with her, never mind

taking a dagger and killing her. Cohrven stabbing his brother would have been just like me stabbing Erelie. I could never have done it.

Cohrven, though, had been capable of doing so. He had done such incredible violence when he was a child. I wasn't like him. I was only trying to survive.

He *was* dangerous. I was right to fear him. I was right to stay distant.

When the sun had begun to brighten the horizon in an orange haze, Cohrven woke, groaning and taking me out of a thoughtless stupor. I had managed to stay awake, but my eyes were starting to slip shut.

He rubbed his forehead and sat up, blinking the sleep away before asking, "Did you stay up all night?"

I had to take a moment to understand what he said. His voice was always so low in the morning.

"I did," I whispered, my throat hoarse.

Rolling his eyes, he stood and cracked his neck, then his back. "You shouldn't have. It's safe here. Now, ten miles past the Bonebright Mountains—that's when you have to concern yourself with all sorts of monsters."

"What if there had been more Sorcen soldiers?" I argued. "You were a useless, vulnerable lump."

I didn't tell him the second reason I stayed up—that I was scared he wouldn't wake.

He didn't fight my assessment, instead shrugging, then rolling his shoulders.

"Hjairn is still a week away," he said. "You don't have time to sleep now."

"I'm fine." I tried to ignore the question swirling inside my brain, hating to have to ask him something obvious. "What was that first word you said?"

"Hjairn," he explained, a slight smile lingering on his lips. "My home. The seat of the Liral Court."

“Oh.” I wasn’t surprised that I knew so little of Liral, but I *was* surprised that I wanted to know more. The sun remained low in the sky, the dawn lacking the bright energy I had grown used to in Sorcen. For the first time, I wondered why the sun rose only to linger at the horizon.

“Come on, Allina,” Cohrven said, tucking his blanket into his rucksack.

I stood and packed, forcing my eyes to stay open. When we set out, Cohrven still had a ghost of a smile on his face, and a pounding headache was threatening to split my head in half.

Two days later, I was fading. My head never stopped hurting. I moved in methodical, graceless motions, like a butterfly trying to swim in a heavy current.

Time blurred with the low sun. I couldn’t sleep at night without the bright sunlight of Sorcen during the day. I had trouble discerning whether the sun was setting or rising, relying on Cohrven’s knowledge to know when to wake or rest.

Liral held none of Sorcen’s vibrant colour, the forest either full of blacks and grays at night, or cast in orange hues during the day. Across the fire each night, I could see the brown of Cohrven’s eyes, but during dawn and dusk, they glowed red in the sun’s light. It was eerie, and something I wasn’t sure I could ever become used to.

What felt like four days later, I *had* faded. I was a spectre walking on a whole separate plane of existence from Cohrven and the life in the forest. From time to time, a sharp pain erupted in my chest and I had to choke down a gasp.

Late one afternoon, when my vision blurred, then went black, Cohrven was there to catch me. When I regained consciousness and opened my eyes a moment later, everything was fuzzy. Cohrven tried to help me stand, but my legs wouldn’t hold me up.

With an arm underneath my knees and another one around my shoulders, he set me on the ground. I closed my eyes when his hands covered my scalp. His magic flowed into me, but it



didn't help. My headache lessened, but it remained. There were some things that simply couldn't be healed.

"Allina, can you speak?" His thumbs massaged my temples as he handled me carefully—*tenderly*. Too tenderly.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Where does it hurt?" Pulses of his magic washed over my skin, seeking my sickness.

"My head. It aches."

"Are you tired?"

"Yes. I can barely think."

"Look at me." I forced my eyes open and found his brown ones scrutinizing my face clinically. Within moments, I grew dizzy and shut them again. Nausea flooded through me.

"Cohrven, I'm..." His magic pushed into my skull and I drifted into oblivion.



I WAS FLOATING in the ocean, warm and comfortable as waves rolled over me, bringing me gently to shore.

I was safe. There was no urgency. No tension. No fear.

But my wings hurt, an annoying twinge that turned into a deeper ache as I eased into awareness. They were cramped against something solid. I wriggled, trying to free them, and something shifted against my back.

I cracked my eyes open and stared into the fabric of Cohrven's dark shirt, lit only by the moon. Glancing up, I saw the muscles of his throat working as he swallowed.

I wasn't strong enough to keep my eyes open for long, so I let them close and leaned my face into the heat of his chest. My head still throbbed, but the sharp, distracting pain had dulled.

"I know you're awake," Cohrven murmured.

I grumbled in response. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep. Nothing else mattered.

“It kills me to admit this,” he sighed, “but my arms are getting tired.”

“Then let’s stop for the night,” I slurred.

He sighed again, and adjusted the arm holding my legs. “We’re going to be out of the forest in a few miles. We’ll reach the crevasse soon, then by late morning, we’ll reach Hjairn’s outer wall.”

I groaned at the prospect of more walking. “You need to sleep.”

“I’m feeling fine,” Cohrven said dismissively, though I could hear the fatigue in his voice. “Once we make it to Hjairn, I can rest.” He stopped walking and, with some reluctance, said, “I’m going to set you down now.” Carefully, he knelt and withdrew his arm from under my knees once my feet hit the ground. Making sure I could actually balance on my wobbly legs, he left me to stand on my own.

It was a slow walk to Hjairn, the darkness enveloping both of us as I clung to Cohrven’s rucksack, relying on him to lead the way. I was still tired and weak, and I couldn’t wait to fall into a comfortable bed at the first chance. The fact that it might be Cohrven’s bed didn’t even bother me.

A red blotch of embarrassment spread across my cheeks when I regained my wits and really thought about Cohrven carrying me in his arms. I should have jumped off him the moment I had realized what was happening instead of cuddling into his chest.

Right before we exited the forest’s protective boughs, Cohrven told me to make us invisible. We could run into a Liral patrol at any time, and he didn’t want to be seen until we reached Hjairn.

The sun was halfway through rising when we reached the crevasse. As far as I could see, a thin, black, shiny metal bridge stretched across a bottomless tear in the ground. Twin square guard towers perched at the ends of either side of the

bridge, an abnormally large number of soldiers manning the parapets. Black flags flew from the towers—flags of mourning for the heir to the Liral Court’s throne.

If Cohrven noticed, he didn’t care. We passed by the towers unnoticed, though Cohrven scrutinized the guards thoroughly, and began the long walk across the metal bridge. Curiosity overtook me, and before I could stop myself, I climbed onto the rail and launched myself into the crevasse.

I wasn’t foolish enough to fall for long. I opened my wings after a few heartbeats, skimming along the cliff face and sinking lower and lower. I expected to see the bottom at some point, but eventually the dim light of the sunrise grew more distant above me, and still there was nothing. Sensing that going farther down would be a waste of my time, I gave up and flew back to the bridge.

Cohrven had kept walking while I explored, and I landed behind him with a soft thump. “Do you know how this was formed?” I asked. Though the rock edges were ragged, and natural, it seemed so out of place in the vast Liral landscape.

“When the Sunkiller brought down the sun from the sky, a piece of it crashed into the ground here,” Cohrven said, his complete seriousness leaving me shocked.

“The worst fae to ever exist did this?”

A high-pitched, strangled sound left Cohrven’s mouth. “The Sunkiller is *my* direct ancestor, and the only reason the Liral and Sorcen Courts have survived this long.”

I didn’t push back against Cohrven’s delusion. Little of Liral’s history was known to those of Sorcen, but we had all heard the legend of the Sunkiller. He had pulled the sun from the sky tens of thousands of years ago in an attempt to destroy the Sorcen Court. Aurricc had saved us by creating a new sun using half of his heart.

It was hard to know which stories were real, and which were simply meant for entertainment, but clearly Liral had their own version of this story where the Sunkiller was a hero of legends. Maybe he did exist, then, but I doubted he had pulled

the sun from the sky. And I also doubted that a piece of the sun had fallen to create the crevasse I was walking across.

I also sincerely doubted that the sun lingering on the horizon was half of Aurric's heart.

After crossing the bridge, we wandered through cratered fields, crops still growing on the expanse of shallow valleys and short hills. We passed the first Liral patrols when a black speck appeared on the horizon—Hjairn. Cohrven scrutinized the soldiers as they marched by and nodded to himself, pleased with something. With each passing mile, Hjairn grew larger and my heart beat faster. I didn't know what I would find at the palace—I couldn't even begin to guess.

As we approached Hjairn, a jagged peak materialized ahead of us, splitting the orange skyline and growing larger and more formidable with every step. Soon, we were walking beneath its triangular shadow. I squinted, trying to see what it was, but closing the distance only offered more confusion as smaller peaks began to appear, pointed in every direction, like the ground had erupted in countless spikes of earth.

Soon, a wall loomed over us, built of slick black stone with no seams and patrolled by swaths of soldiers behind the edges of the parapets and along the outer expanse. The wall blocked my view of everything but the tallest jagged peak that glowed with an inner light.

Nausea curled in my stomach as I faced the unknown inner seat of the Liral Court. I was nervous to enter Hjairn, and even more nervous about keeping my illusions up at all times. It wasn't that my magic couldn't maintain the illusions, but I was worried about getting distracted by the new sights and sounds that surrounded me. If anyone could have seen me, I'm sure I looked ready to throw up the meagre contents of my stomach.

Cohrven, though, had a rare smile on his face as he stood in front of the wall's entrance. The gate was open as soldiers closely observed a line of fae that entered the city slowly—travelling merchants with rucksacks stuffed high with their wares, farmers with sparsely-filled wagons, nobles seated in a bright blue carriage, pulled by the shiniest horses I had ever

seen, their hair glistening like copper, from the very tips of their noses to ends of their hooves.

As fae approached the city, they dropped from the sky to land on the ground and enter on foot, seemingly forbidden to enter by wing. Sure enough, as I looked to the sky, soldiers were stationed high above the wall, hovering in the air with bows hanging by their sides. Cohrven had been right—his father was preparing for Osreth’s war.

“Allina, I need you to make my wings an illusion,” Cohrven said. He spread them wide, the frayed pieces rustling against one another. I wove magic around them, ensuring my illusion clung tight. To anyone’s eyes, even Cohrven’s, they would appear whole again. When he flapped them, they absorbed what little light shone from the horizon.

“You can’t let anyone touch you,” I reminded him.

His voice was monotone when he said, “That won’t be a problem.”

We snuck into Hjairn through the open gate, easily avoiding the crush of fae and the scrutiny of the guards. In the shadow of the wall, I made Cohrven visible. Then we stepped into the dim light.

# Sixteen

HJAIRN WAS FASCINATING. I forgot Cohrven was even with me as I took in the grandeur of the city. The jagged spires I had seen while approaching jutted diagonally out of the ground to various heights with no order to their placement. Homes and shops were built into the shiny black rocks, with windows and doors chiseled into the sides. Black cobblestone streets wrapped around the spires, resulting in a maze of destinations. Everywhere I looked, swaths of orange globes containing twisting fire floated in the air, providing light where the sun could not.

All of it, though, was eclipsed by the spire leaning *over* half of Hjairn. Like a dagger slicing through the fabric of the sky, it reached towards the thin gray clouds that lingered above the city, reflecting the blood-red light of the sun into a wavy distortion. On the flat side that faced Hjairn, tall windows stretched the width of the spire on each alternate floor, glowing with warm yellow light.

“Sky’s End,” Cohrven whispered, trying not to appear like he was talking to himself. I jolted at the sound of his deep voice. “My home.”

I tried to rein in my amazement, and followed Cohrven closely. Before anyone recognized him, the city rang with laughter. Fae rushed through the confusing streets with practiced confidence, and merchants leaned over their stalls, calling out to passersby.

The first fae that noticed him stopped in the middle of her conversation, her joyful expression freezing in place, then melting into fear. Her companions followed her gaze, and soon the streets fell silent and all movement stopped, every fae bowing their heads and keeping their stares locked on the ground.

Cohrven never stopped walking; he never looked anywhere but straight ahead.

But he knew.

In front of him, fae rushed to get out of his way. I studied them curiously as I trailed Cohrven. Some were awed, but most wore terror plain on their faces.

Cohrven's smile wavered, then disappeared altogether. He set his jaw. With tensed shoulders and clenched fists, he stalked through the parting crowd with powerful strides, leaving me behind. I had to fly to catch up to him.

"Slow down," I hissed. Like usual, he ignored me. He looked absolutely sinister, hands on his swords, glaring straight ahead. If I were in his way, I would respond exactly like his subjects. From the time it had taken to get halfway across the city, his demeanour had changed entirely.

They feared him—the fae that he would one day rule. Behind us, I could hear the whispers that started quiet before building to a crescendo. The soldiers that we passed saluted him after stuttering their steps in surprise, never making eye contact. He continued without so much as an acknowledgement.

Once we reached Sky's End, our progress was halted by another slick, black, circular wall wrapped around the palace, manned by countless guards, both on foot and in the air. The iron bars of the gate were down, preventing anyone from entering. When Cohrven appeared, the soldiers above started cranking as fast as their arms could allow.

Not bothering to wait, Cohrven lifted the gate himself. The chains and gears on top of the wall squealed as the iron slid upwards. The next moment, we entered the front courtyard of Sky's End, devoid of grass and covered with large, marbled, square flagstones of black and dark grey.

"Cohrven!" The loud cry echoed across the vast swaths of stone. Someone must have sent word of his arrival ahead of us.

"Cohrven!" Another cry. A dark blur in the sky sped towards him and he sprinted towards it, his face brightening, a wide grin stretching across his cheeks.

When the blur was close, he stopped, opened his arms, and a

young girl barrelled into him. He caught her and spun her around in the air. Her pale face was red and shiny from crying, her eyes swollen with tears. Even as he held her tight, she sobbed hysterically into his shoulder.

I stayed as far away as I could. He had folded his wings just before the girl had wrapped her arms about his neck and her hands had brushed against them, breaking the illusion. I would have to make one again before long. Even though I tried to offer him some privacy, I could still hear what was being said.

“I th-thought y-you were d-dead,” the girl stammered, her words barely legible. She broke into a fit of sobs again and Cohrven squeezed her tighter.

“I’m fine, Val,” he assured her. “You don’t have to cry. I’m here. *I’m here.*”

“I k-know. I’m j-just so happy. I really th-thought...Father s-said...” Another sob erupted from her, shaking her chest. He took a step back from her, brushing her glossy black hair out of her brown eyes and mussing it with a hand. Wings the colour of a starless night, the same as Cohrven’s, fluttered incessantly at her back as she tried to calm down.

As Cohrven hugged his sister again, a beautiful fae darted down from the palace, garbed in opulent purple robes of gossamer, a long train trailing behind her and rippling in the air. She landed a few paces away, her black hair wild and windswept, sparkling tears flowing from her brown eyes and dripping down the smooth skin of her neck.

“Cohrven!” she yelled, losing any semblance of royal composure as she reached towards him. “My darling!”

He let go of Val and ran to his mother to hug her, leaning back and lifting her off the ground. “Mother, I’m alright.” She held his face in her hands and smiled up at him, her lower lip trembling, before breaking down into tears again. Val joined them.

They didn’t notice when a large, brown-haired, bearded man in full black armour landed a few paces away from them. His black crown of jagged, crystal spikes glimmered, his black



wings flared wide, and when he smiled, his soft brown eyes crinkled at the edges.

“Son,” he said, gaining the attention of his family.

Cohrven swiped a hand across his eyes, trying to hide his welling tears, and faced his father with a grin. “Father, it’s good to see you.” Taking two giant steps, the King gathered all three of them into his arms and held them close.

Jealousy ripped through me at the sight. I tried to beat it down, but the emotion was too strong, too raw. The Nightheart had a family that loved him. If they were crying so hard after seeing him alive, I could only imagine how devastated they had been when he was captured—when they thought he had been murdered.

I didn’t have anyone. I didn’t have parents. I didn’t even have an uncle anymore, and I had surely lost Erelie.

I wanted what was in front of me. I wanted what Cohrven had so much I could barely breathe. My heart wrenched and I turned away from them.

Finally, I knew why he wanted to get to Liral as fast as possible. He wanted to see his family, to make sure they knew he was alive. He had known how grief-stricken they would be.

He could have just told me. I would have understood.

“Cohrven, we must meet with the War Council,” the King boomed. I whipped around. They had all finally separated, so I placed an illusion on Cohrven’s wings again and inched closer to the conversation.

“Heron, look at him,” the Queen ordered, still clinging tight to Cohrven, her arms wrapped around one of his. “He needs rest. Hold the meeting tomorrow.”

“Osreth kidnapped *our son*, Aehla. He tried to *kill our son*. For that, we will destroy Sorcen and he will burn. The sooner we march, the better.”

Cohrven glanced at me. I nodded.

“Osreth can burn any time. *Our son* is about to collapse from exhaustion. Look at him!” Aehla argued.

“I think we should be cautious about attacking, Father,” Cohrven interrupted. He flared his wings, whole under my illusion. “Osreth’s army wasn’t gathering when I was in captivity. His soldiers kept saying that I was *leverage*.”

Heron narrowed his eyes in thought. “That is strange, Cohrven. Osreth may be stupid, but he is careful. Why else would he kidnap you but to start a war?”

“I thought it strange as well, but maybe he’s trying to throw us off guard. Prepare to defend Liral, but don’t mount an offensive against Sorcen. Not yet.”

I could have crumpled to the ground in relief. Cohrven had kept his promise to me.

“We will discuss this,” Heron said, looking pointedly at his wife, “tomorrow.”

Aehla beamed in victory. “Come, my darling.” She hooked an arm around one of Cohrven’s and began flapping her wings. Val was already in the air, flying in circles. Cohrven immediately folded his.

“I’ve been flying for weeks,” he sighed. “I would prefer to walk for a bit longer.”

Without question, Aehla folded her wings and tugged him forward along the cobblestone. Val dropped to the ground and latched onto his other arm. As they led him away, Cohrven looked over his shoulder at his father.

Heron winked and remained where he was, arms crossed. Soon, though, his brow furrowed and his smile turned into a frown. He watched Cohrven go, then flew off high into the sky.

# Seventeen

SKY'S END WAS just as opulent as the Sun Palace, if not more. Black marble veined with white covered every visible surface, even the ornate pillars that reached to the arched ceiling. Statues of fae and creatures unknown to me lined the entrance, carved from the same marble as the rest of the interior. The chandeliers hanging from high above were constructed from a dark mahogany wood that matched the furniture decorating the halls. Marble sconces lining the walls glowed orange, mimicking the sun.

Tall glass windows let in as much of the dim light as was possible. In the centre of the palace, a square opening led up past every single floor, set diagonally to follow the leaning angle of the spire. The seemingly endless maze above was mesmerizing. Fae flew in every direction, camouflaged by the dark marble and the shadows cast by the numerous ledges.

Aehla and Val unfurled their wings to start the ascent, but Cohrven's wings remained tight at his back. "I would rather be lifted to the forty-eighth floor," Cohrven said, his weariness stark and undisguised.

Again, without question, Aehla walked with him to a wide set of wooden doors hidden in a corner. Val jumped onto Cohrven, and he carried her with one arm while he used the other to hold his mother's hand. I didn't know how he still had the strength.

A giant marble sun carved in relief took up most of the back wall of the entrance hall, rays beaming across the entire long expanse. I frowned, wondering at how strange it was that Liralans would dedicate such a beautiful piece of art to a sun that had forsaken them long ago.

Once Cohrven and his family disappeared behind the wooden door, a clacking sound started, and I realized they were on a lift that would carry them up to Cohrven's quarters. Following Cohrven's instruction, I grinned as I launched myself into the air and flew up, counting the floors as I sped

by, twisting around fae as I went. As I narrowly dodged a cook's assistant carrying an armful of purple carrots, only to roll hastily to avoid an armored guard flying downwards, I laughed in exhilaration.

Higher and higher, I flew past the forty-eighth floor to the very tip of the spire, where a small window faced the city. In the triangular peak, I hovered, gazing out towards Hjairn. From such a great height, all that was visible were the burning orange globes floating in a sea of black. If I believed in the gods, I would have imagined that this was how Helveda looked to spirits as they descended to the afterlife.

A shiver crawled up my spine as memories of the Suntrul earthquake came back to me unbidden. *Allina*. Someone had called my name as the earth splintered and I fell past the cobblestones, fell down into suffocating darkness, fell without end.

Shaking my head free of those thoughts, I focused on the globes far below me, flickering with inner fire. My vision during the earthquake had only been my mind imagining things as I panicked. There was nothing more to it.

Even so, I quickly flew back down to find Cohrven.

Once I reached the forty-eighth floor, I perched on the railing overlooking the open space. A small balcony led to dual marble doors built into the wall, with aged bronze handles that would not let me inside no matter how hard I pulled. A wooden door sat left of the doors to Cohrven's room, which I presumed was the lift's exit. Sure enough, I heard a clacking sound grow louder and louder, and, soon, Cohrven, Val, and Aehla emerged from behind the wooden door.

Something inside the marble door clicked and it opened by itself, unlocked by Cohrven's magic. After kissing the tops of their heads, Cohrven disentangled himself from Val and let go of his mother's hand.

"I love you, Cohrven," Aehla said, staring at him like she couldn't bear to let him out of her sight. "I'm so glad you're here. That you're safe."

“I love you too, Mother,” he rumbled. “And you too, Val,” he added, after chuckling at her pout. I leaned against the wall, facing away from them and studying the ceiling, knowing that I didn’t belong there, that I shouldn’t have been watching.

I was an intruder.

I closed my eyes and blocked them out. I was tempted to lie on the floor and let everything go black. Every thought I had was sluggish.

Rough fingertips grazed my shoulder, roaming underneath my braid to linger on my spine. A warm hand soon spread out across the back of my sore neck, thumb lightly stroking my skin, magic emanating through the marrow of my bones, searching for any lingering illness. I arched into the soothing touch.

“Allina,” Cohrven whispered, “how are you feeling?”

I cringed away from his hand and faced him, the sudden movement making me lightheaded. “Very unwell.”

“This way.” He gestured with a tilt of his head. I followed him through the door, my earlier dizziness returning as I gripped the slick walls to propel myself forward.

The doors shut behind me with a soft shudder. While Cohrven ran around prompting globes of fae-light built into the walls to brighten, I admired his rooms.

I stood in his cavernous sitting room, which was bigger than mine, I noted with annoyance, and decorated with lavish furniture built from intricately-carved dark mahogany. Two chairs upholstered with brown leather sat facing the door, and a long, black velvet settee faced the line of windows that jutted outwards, leaning over the city. The white marble table in the middle of the seating arrangement housed a stack of what appeared to be royal missives, each letter embossed with a gold seal.

A large, almost oversized, wooden desk sat right in front of the windows, several short candles dripping with old, hardened wax indicating that the spot was well used by Cohrven. A marble fireplace was embedded in the wall to the

right of his desk, full of old white ashes that remained from the last time it had been used—before Cohrven had been kidnapped by my uncle. Papers of all sizes and open books cluttered every surface.

Tall shelves covered every free space in the walls, reaching to the ceiling and crammed with layers of books and weapons of all kinds, whether bright and shiny or rusted with age. Tapestries of deep burgundy, black, and forest green hung across the ceiling, hiding the marble above.

I stepped forward and slipped on something. Just barely, I managed to catch the back of the settee instead of falling forward onto my face. Cohrven looked at me, startled, then surveyed the room and grimaced.

Everything righted itself in a moment. The shield that I had tripped over flew to a corner. Papers fluttered by my head and organized themselves on the desk. Then the black velvet curtains on the windows slid shut.

“Val likes to check in on me,” he explained, shaking his head at some distant memory. Fae lamps bathed the room in soft yellow light, and I found myself wanting to stoke a fire, lie down on the large settee, and fall asleep beneath a fur blanket to the crackling of the flames.

A hidden door slid open to my right, and Cohrven ushered me through to his bedroom. A large canopy bed of the same dark mahogany wood sat against the far wall, draped with black curtains tied to the bedposts. Just like the sitting room, bookshelves and books were everywhere, even lying askew on the floor. I caught a glimpse of a large balcony before the curtains slid shut on Cohrven’s command, hiding the glass windows that covered the entire left wall of the room and leaving me in darkness.

“Over here.” Fae-light came to life by the door, filling the space with a muted light. Rifling through a chest at the end of his bed, Cohrven produced a thick wool blanket and grabbed a pillow from his bed. When he spread them out on a plump settee stationed in front of a second marble fireplace, I realized that he thought I was actually going to sleep in his room—with

him right there.

We had slept near each other for weeks, but this felt entirely different. I was in a palace. There was my dignity to consider.

“No.”

“Absolutely no one will know you’re here, Allina,” he said, letting me know that he understood my unvoiced concern.

“No,” I repeated.

“Please, just rest,” he begged. “This is the safest room in the entire palace. The door locks from the inside, and I’m the only fae that can unlock it from the outside. I wouldn’t be suggesting that you sleep here if I didn’t think it was the best option.”

I tried to let go of my fear of being caught in Cohrven’s room, and the shame that would follow, but I couldn’t. Even though I hadn’t been a real heir, I was still expected to adhere to what royalty considered decent, proper behaviour. “I can’t...”

“We’ve been sleeping a few feet away from each other for over two weeks,” he interrupted. “Try not to think of this as any different.”

I stood for a while, trying to think of excuses and alternatives, but my legs began to wobble, and soon my desire for sleep controlled me. I gave up, trudging to the settee and snuggling under the warm blanket. He was right—no one would ever find me anyway.

“I have to go see someone,” Cohrven whispered. “I’ll be back soon.”

I was asleep before he took his first step.

# Eighteen

THE DOOR SLID open and I dropped the papers on the floor. I rushed to gather them as Cohrven walked into his room, his brows drawn in confusion. He couldn't see me, of course, nor could he hear me as I slapped the papers back on his nightstand.

“Allina, are you here?” When I didn't answer, he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “If you're looking through *my personal property*, you won't find anything interesting.”

Unfortunately, he was right. It was all mind-numbing politics, weapon manuscripts and strategy guides. There was no information about the supposedly non-existent Wither anywhere—*but* I hadn't searched the sitting room yet.

“Talking to yourself?” I shed my illusion once I was standing in the doorway behind him. His shoulders dropped, and he sighed before swivelling to face me.

“Do you honestly think I believe you *weren't* tearing my room apart?”

“I wasn't.” He rolled his eyes and wiped his forehead with a hand. His general dampness, ripe odour, and the weapons strapped to his belt indicated that he had been training.

I would never admit it out loud, but his stamina impressed me. While I had slept for almost two days straight since arriving at Sky's End, he had been up and running around the palace the morning after we'd arrived—at least, that's what I vaguely remembered him saying. I had woken up for a few moments yesterday, had a brief conversation with him, then had gone right back to sleep.

This morning, I had woken up for good. After taking a long, hot bath and putting on a clean yellow dress that Cohrven had stolen from Val for me, I was feeling like myself again.

“I'll show you to the kitchens,” Cohrven said. “There's plenty of leftover breakfast for you to pilfer.” My stomach



rumbled at the very mention of food, saliva gathering on my tongue as I thought of sausages and sticky buns. Cohrven worked to remove his sword belt while I waited.

I combed my fingers through my hair by habit. Without being done up in a tight braid, it fell to my hips in loose waves. The room fell silent, and I glanced up to see Cohrven had paused halfway through removing his sword belt. His eyes followed my fingers as they dragged through the golden strands.

I stilled my hands and our eyes met. He looked to the corner sharply, clearing his throat and continuing to loosen his belt, throwing his swords on the bed when he was done.

When I had been running for my life, it had been easy to ignore the memory of him bathing in the stream, the tilt of his head, and the resulting desire that threatened to control me with its raw, unrelenting need—but now, alone, and with no immediate danger, I couldn't forget. And it was infuriating.

But I would never let myself be unfortunate enough to be laid on the bed in front of me.

“I'll go to the kitchens by myself.”

“Allina—”

“I want to go by myself,” I said, not letting him finish his sentence. I didn't think I wanted to hear whatever he was about to say.

With pursed lips, he stared at the floor and nodded. “Go to the second floor, turn left, and the kitchens will be on the right. Explore all you want, but don't let anyone see you.”

“Thank you.” After covering myself with an illusion, I leapt off the balcony into a freefall.

The ceilings were high and the hallways wide—perfect for flying. I looped around servants, passing far too close to their trailing robes and fluttering wings. In the kitchen, I dodged cooks and their assistants as they prepared luncheon, and risked burnt fingers grabbing a loaf of bread that had just come out of the oven.

Two stolen slices of chicken and one borrowed flask of strawberry juice later, I was floating through the gardens located in the courtyard at the back of the spire, facing away from the bustling city of Hjairn. I lounged beneath the wide canopy of a maple tree as I devoured my meal. The sun had risen to its peak, so I could appreciate my surroundings, even if they were tinted orange.

Thankfully, I had found a quiet spot in the massive collection of low-light trees and flowers. Not one fae passed by. The steady hum of crickets was all I heard.

After I finished eating, I roamed the gardens. My stomach was so full it hurt, unused to such a volume of food after having only been fed meager rations for weeks, and I hoped a walk would soothe it. If he were with me, Cohrven would have shaken his head.

Not that it mattered what he would have done.

Headstones came into my view as I rounded the corner of a tall, curved hedge. I halted as soon as I saw them. I shouldn't have gone in, but curiosity overwhelmed me.

Grandiose mausoleums dwarfed the scattering of headstones—some marble, some obsidian, some tarnished silver—but each was the size of a small house, with no windows from which the dead could peer. The inscriptions on many of them had been worn away by time, and as I ventured farther into the royal cemetery, the years etched into the stone became less recent, and the names became illegible.

As I walked amongst the final resting places of Liral's royal family, I tried not to imagine what lay inside their tombs. In many, dust would be all that remained. Death claimed kings and queens just as it did other fae.

Unlike many, the entombed dead didn't make me uncomfortable. I had spent a lot of my time in the Sorcen crypts talking to my parents, their immortal effigies carved into the top of their granite tombs. I told them everything—my dreams, my fears, my sorrows. I had never expected a response, and I had never gotten one. The dead were just that.

A mausoleum built from smooth, gray stone slabs appeared in my vision, tucked in the far side of the cemetery. It gleamed in the sunlight, new compared to the crumbling structures surrounding it. My breath caught.

Cohrven's brother had to be in there.

As my anticipation grew, my palms started sweating. I would probably find nothing of interest. It would have a name and some dates engraved in the side. But maybe it would offer me some insight into the boy's death.

Cohrven's sister didn't act like he had killed her brother. His parents didn't act like he had killed their son. Family could forgive each other almost anything, but murder? I couldn't understand how that was possible. How could Cohrven's parents get over the death of their first child? How could they even look at Cohrven?

Their display the other day had been unsettling. The Liral Court was supposed to be a haven of depravity. The Liral King was supposed to be cruel and corrupt, and I assumed that the rest of his family would have followed in his example, but when I arrived with Cohrven, I hadn't seen any of that.

I had only seen love.

I was ten paces from the gray mausoleum when I saw black hair and skidded to a stop. Cohrven stood in the shade, his back to me. Motionless, he stared at the structure.

My stomach dropped. This hadn't been a good idea.

I scurried backwards and kicked a stray stone with my heel. It clattered against a headstone before I could silence it. Cohrven whirled around, looked right at me, and my illusion shattered.

"What are you doing here?" he said, deathly calm, but his face contorted with rage as he stomped towards me. I panicked and froze on the spot.

"I...I was just wandering and..." My mouth opened and closed as I tried to think of a reasonable excuse. Eyes blazing with fury, he reached me and turned me around. With a hand between my flared wings, he steered me, gently but firmly,

back towards the newer tombs.

When his brother's mausoleum was far from view, he stopped and I wrenched away from his hand. He closed his eyes, leaned his head forward, and pinched the bridge of his nose, taking deep breaths. "*Never* go back there, Allina." He lifted his head, his eyes serious and his jaw clenched tight. "If you want to wander the cemetery, stay around this area, and don't go past those twin black mausoleums."

I had expected a lot more yelling, but his anger subsided as quick as it had come.

"This section is much more interesting, anyway." He pointed at a mausoleum gilded with copper long turned green. "See, that's where King Jailen Groundshaker and Queen Alysse Brightwater, my great-great-great-great grandparents, lie. They lived for over eight hundred years, and spent most of them compiling a bestiary that sits in the palace library. They died within moments of each other, mere days after its completion. If you look closely, you can see that hundreds of different creatures have been carved into the stone walls. When I was younger, I used to come here and try to identify them."

Intrigued, I set off towards the structure. When I didn't hear Cohrven's footsteps following mine, I paused and looked over my shoulder. He was walking the other way.

"Where are you going?"

He turned to me, raising his eyebrows. "I thought... that you would rather be alone."

So had I.

"If you're not otherwise occupied, I wouldn't mind a guide." My mouth spoke without consulting my better sense. "These names mean nothing to me."

"I'm not."

"Good." *Why did I say that?* "Because I bet I can name more beasts than you can."

He started to grin, but quickly bit it back. "I came here every day until I could name them all," he said, hands in his pockets

as he strolled back to me. “I very much doubt that.”

# Nineteen

MY GRANDFATHER, YOHR Steelsinger, married my grandmother, Queen Tienne Shadestealer, when she was already on the throne. It wasn't necessarily a scandal, but many fae were unhappy about his station. He was a blacksmith from a smaller town called Uyrn, that she met while on a tour of Liral. Her horse lost a shoe and she and her party had to stay there until the next day."

Once Cohrven had started talking, he hadn't stopped. After I had gotten over my initial astonishment, I let myself enjoy his stories. He was proud of his ancestry, and he knew so much more about his family than I did about mine.

He sat against a tree beside his grandparents' large obsidian mausoleum and I lay on the grass a few long paces from him, my hair splayed out behind me. The setting sun peeked through the leaves, covering our skin in shifting patterns of light. It was simple to ignore my distrust of him, especially when he was being so open.

"They had a not-so-secret tryst that night, and in the morning he rode out with my grandmother after she convinced him to come to Hjairn. Within the year, they were married. He never stopped working in the smithy, even as a king. It bewildered most of the nobility. My grandmother died fifty years before I was born, and my father took the throne then. My grandfather died when I was six."

"Is your father their only child?"

"Yes. My grandmother lost her first baby in childbirth, and it took years until she was ready to have my father. After he was born healthy, she didn't want to risk losing any more children. My mother, however, has three younger sisters and one younger brother. I have twelve younger cousins. They all live in Davjar, a large city on the east coast. I've only..."

As he kept talking, I closed my eyes and found his words blending together. The deep timbre of his voice was relaxing.

Too relaxing.

*I could have listened to it all the time.*



I WOKE UP when something nudged me. My bleary vision could make out Cohrven standing above me, tapping the toe of his boot against my shoulder. I rolled away from him onto my stomach, propped myself up on my elbows, and glared.

“Am I that boring?” he asked, his smile telling me that he wasn’t serious. Even so, he folded his arms across his chest and waited for my answer.

“No, I’m just...” Yawning, I slumped flat against the ground.

“Tired.” He finished my sentence for me.

“Yes,” I groaned.

“I have to attend dinner, so I can’t stay much longer.”

“That’s fine. I’ll come back with you.” Cohrven extended a hand and I used it to pull myself up without thinking. We made our way out of the cemetery, but just before we stepped past the hedge into the rest of the garden, I stopped. “I have a question.” One that had been gnawing at me.

“Go ahead.”

“Why did you tell me everything that you did about your family?” I had heard secrets for which his ancestors would have been executed.

“I trust you, Allina,” he stated. I didn’t know how to reply to that. “I trust you,” he repeated after my prolonged silence, as if he was making sure the words were carved into me. “You saved my life.”

My eyes widened. It was the first time he had acknowledged it.

“I was dead,” he continued. “I had given up. Then I saw you standing above me and...” He cut himself off and took a

breath. “I have to go. Val will be looking for me.”

“Alright,” I whispered, but he was already walking away. I made myself invisible and snuck into the kitchens again to get my own food. A symphony of clattering pots and yelling cooks filled the room as I sat in a corner and ate a slice of steak and mushroom pie alone.

I tried to talk myself out of it, but after I devoured my dinner, I flew to the dining hall. Through the open doorway I could see Cohrven and his family, seated close together at a small table. He was gesturing at Val and speaking, though I was far away enough that I couldn’t hear anything more than the low rumble of his voice.

When all four of them broke out into peals of laughter, jealousy tainted me, the same as it had before. And I had to leave before it worsened. Before I started to hate a sister, a mother, and a father just for existing. Before I started to hate myself for feeling lost and lonely.

I didn’t know where to go. I didn’t know what to do. I flew.

My path took me to Cohrven’s room, but when I reached it, I couldn’t get in. I bashed my fists against the doors until they bruised, and what started as tears borne of frustration soon turned into tears borne of everything. Fierce want boiled in my chest and ran molten through my bones, opening up the cracks I had been trying to seal with indifference. Want for something I could never have, that I would never have, splintered the collected mask I had forced on myself. When I crumpled to my knees and shattered, it was not elegant.

I was only able to hide my sobs until Cohrven bumped into me as he tried to walk through his door, his shin hitting my slouched shoulder and breaking my illusion. Immediately, he fell to his knees beside me. “Allina, what’s wrong?”

“*Nothing.*” It was such a blatant lie. I almost screamed at him to go away. But I wasn’t hidden anymore. Other fae could hear me.

“Come inside,” he prompted, opening the doors. When he tried to wrap an arm about my waist and help me stand, I



pushed him away and scrambled up by myself. I hid my face behind my hair and charged towards the bathing room, but Cohrven vaulted over his settee and intercepted me.

“Kingsdaughter,” he said, his tone lethal, like the sharp edge of a knife, “tell me if anyone has hurt you. Tell me, and they will suffer.”

*He thought...*

“No one,” I choked out. I slumped back onto his settee, my head down, my hands and my hair concealing my red, swollen, snot-stained face. “No one here.”

He let out a loud, relieved breath, then approached me, his steps light and slow. I could barely see him through my fingers. His clothes rustled as he kneeled in front of me. “Please let me know why you’re crying.”

I couldn’t. I had to be strong in front of him. Any weakness I showed, he would remember, and he would use against me.

“Talk to me,” he pleaded. “I want to listen.”

I opened my mouth to tell him to leave me alone, but a sob came out instead. I had been silent for too long. Ever since we left Noranin, I had kept my despair quiet. After finally letting it out, I couldn’t bear to lock it in again. “I have nothing anymore.” My throat was dry, and the words came out weak. “And now I know that even when I thought I had something, I still had nothing.”

Cohrven didn’t bother commenting, as if he knew that nothing he could say would help.

“My parents are dead. My aunt hates me. My uncle wants to kill me. Erelie thinks I’m a murderous traitor.” As my hands started to shake, my voice grew louder. “Every day I would imagine what my life would be like if I had my parents. I felt guilty for it. Osreth took care of me, but he was never what a father would have been. He made sure never to cross that line. I still thought of him as one anyway.

“Now, all of my memories of him are rotten. Now I know that even when he was smiling, he was debating whether to kill me or not. Now I know that if he had decided to back then,

he would have done it, and he wouldn't have cared.

“You have everything I want. Why do you get to have a family?” I was yelling, and it was petty, but I couldn't stop. “Why do you get to be loved? Why can't I have that?”

I bawled again, loud and ugly.

“I'm sorry,” I said after his long silence. “I don't mean it. I...”

Cohrven put a hand on my knee. “Is this alright?”

I nodded, and he continued. “I am lucky enough to be loved unconditionally. I have a wonderful family that I am so grateful for. Because of them, I know how love feels. I know what a family should be.

“I will not tell you that your uncle didn't love you. Maybe he did, in the only way he knew how to. But real love isn't circumstantial. If someone loves you, they *will* stay when you are at your worst, they *will* fight for you when you can't fight for yourself, and they *will* make sacrifices for you, even when you don't want them to. They will love you more than their dignity, their pride, or their legacy.

“When you were a child, your parents loved you in that way. Your cousin, Erelie, if she loves you as much as you love her, I know that she hasn't stopped. When you feel like you have nothing, know that you don't. You are brave, kind, and strong. You are enough.” He stroked my knee with his thumb. “And you deserve to be loved.”

I lifted my head and met his serious eyes. My face was a soggy mess, but I had no more tears left in me. His words had reached into my chest and started to gather the shattered pieces of me together again. I would have to do the rest myself, but it was a beginning.

Throughout my journey with Cohrven, I had proved I was enough. I had saved him. I had kept him alive. I had buried my grief and persevered. I was so much more than something for my uncle to discard.

Noranin had said that my uncle's failure to love me wasn't because of anything I had done. My uncle was who he was,

she had said, and no one could change him. He would always be what he was.

For the first time in my life, I didn't wonder what I could do to deserve his love, but, rather, I questioned why he deserved mine.

“There's blueberry tarts left over from dinner.” Cohrven stood, his hand leaving my knee. “I'll go steal some from the kitchens. Meanwhile, get dressed in warmer clothes. We're going out.”

He was gone before I could find the words to thank him.

# Twenty

I GRABBED A cloth and wiped my face clean. My eyes were bloodshot, and the skin surrounding them was puffy. They would stay that way until the morning, but at least the red splotches on my cheeks were starting to fade.

Earlier, Cohrven had borrowed more of Val's clothes, unbeknownst to her, and hid them in a drawer in his room. I shuffled through the pile, pulling out thick wool trousers and socks, a brown leather tunic, and a linen shirt to layer underneath.

As soon as I had gotten dressed, Cohrven returned with a black cloak and a rucksack in hand. He tossed me the cloak, and I slung it over my shoulders as he disappeared into his room for a moment and emerged wearing one of his own.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Somewhere peaceful."

"That's not a very descriptive answer."

"Tru—" He tried to play off the syllable like a cough and started again. "You'll see."

"Whatever you say," I replied, looking to the wall. He had been about to tell me to trust him before thinking better of it.

As we walked to the stables, both of us hidden by my illusion, I realized that I already did trust him. Not completely, but I trusted him with my safety, just as he trusted me with his. Our lives had been in each other's hands far too often for us not to.

Cohrven glanced back to check on me, and I smiled. Yes, he had killed his brother. He had never denied it. And maybe it was ignorant of me to think so after seeing everything he was capable of, but there had to be more to the rumours spread about him.

The stables were stationed along the wall behind the palace.

I modified my illusion, making it so that Cohrven was visible and only he could see me. As soon as he said one word in greeting to the stable boys, a horse started whinnying and stomping its hooves.

A wry smile spread across Cohrven's face, even as he shook his head in exasperation. He approached the frenzied painted stallion and calmed it by petting its nose and speaking softly. When he left to grab his tack and was out of sight for mere moments, the horse neighed loudly in protest.

"This is Solheim," Cohrven said once he'd returned. "He's a bit of a grouch."

I laughed as Cohrven stepped into the large stall, slung his saddle over Solheim's back, and worked to tighten the straps. "I helped break him myself, when he was four. Once, he reared and I almost fractured my neck when I fell off. We learned to get along, eventually. Now he's needy."

"He's very pretty," I observed.

Cohrven looked up from where he was crouched and gave me a grin. "Only on the outside."

"Poor Solheim." I reached towards the horse's nose. "Your master's rude." Solheim snorted and chomped at my stretched fingers. I yanked my hand back, wanting to keep it intact. "Or maybe he's honest."

"Careful," Cohrven chided. He slipped the bit in between Solheim's teeth, pulled the bridle on, and joined me in front of his warhorse. "Lift your hand." I did, my palm facing the ground and my elbow bent so that my fingers were far away from Solheim's teeth.

"He's been trained to only obey me and Garnet, his trainer." He placed his hand on top of mine, waiting for a moment and giving me the chance to pull away before squeezing my fingers in between his and reaching our hands towards Solheim's head. "If anyone else tries to ride him, or gets too close when neither of us are here, he'll attack them."

With Cohrven's hand over mine, Solheim didn't go wild when my palm flattened against his forehead. Cohrven let go

and patted the horse's neck, praising him for his good behaviour. I ruffled Solheim's ears, keeping my fingers up high, away from his mouth. As soon as Cohrven removed his hand, though, Solheim flared his nostrils and snorted. I pulled my fingers back as fast as possible.

"Hey! Don't!" Cohrven admonished Solheim, who only snorted again. "That was a good start," he said to me, leading Solheim out of his stall. "He'll like you yet."

"I doubt that."

"Give him some time. Familiarity leads to affection."

"Or hatred."

"Horses don't hate. They fear and distrust." He swung onto his saddle and motioned for me to swing up behind him. I pulled myself up, but instead of wrapping my arms about his waist, I held onto the ridge at the back of the saddle. Since I had made him exempt from my illusion, it didn't break when my legs brushed against his as he loped Solheim past the palace wall and out of Hjairn through a back gate that bypassed the city.

The sun had already set when we reached our destination, a rocky bluff a few miles outside Hjairn's walls. Cohrven tied Solheim to a tree and we hiked up a steep path sheltered by trees. By the time we reached the top, I was breathing embarrassingly hard.

The sky was cloudless and the moon was full, casting the landscape in an ethereal light. Following Cohrven, I wedged through a tight cleft in between two ridges and narrowed my eyes in confusion. There was a glowing pit in the middle of the grassy clearing in front of me, about fifty paces in diameter. Cohrven gestured with a tilt of his chin for me to approach the pit.

He stayed behind as I walked closer, and once I saw into the depths, I gasped and rushed to the edge. Flowers with long, drooping leaves and petals grew from the ground, glowing a luminescent blue. The pit was about ten paces deep, and the flowers were so tall they reached halfway up. As I watched,

their leaves uncurled and lifted towards the moon. The petals followed soon after, straightening until they looked like miniature suns.

“They’re beautiful.”

“There’s more. Wait a moment.” Cohrven spread out a blanket for us to sit on while I was captivated, then gave me the bag of blueberry tarts after taking one for himself. I lay down on my stomach, resting my chin on my hands and peering over the edge of the pit. Cohrven remained standing, his hands clasped behind his back.

A movement caught my eye, and I noticed tiny tunnels on the sides of the pit. A small blue creature about the size of Cohrven’s hand emerged, one that I had never seen before. It carried tiny tools in each of its four arms and walked on two legs, its head disproportionately large to its body. Two large black eyes took up most of its face, leaving its wrinkled mouth and slitted nostrils squished together beneath them. I glanced up at Cohrven, raising my eyebrows, but he only gestured for me to keep looking.

Hundreds of them emerged from the cave, some carrying tiny ropes and axes, some dragging wagons behind them. I could hear their language, but couldn’t understand it as they spoke to each other, their mouths barely moving.

“In the bestiary, they’re called zirelings,” Cohrven said. I watched intently as the zirelings set up workstations around the flowers and began harvesting them. They chopped the flower’s stalk and stood clear as it fell. Once the flower hit the ground, they worked to slice it into smaller pieces that they tied together, then loaded onto their wagons in stacks.

“Val and I flew here often when we were younger, but it’s been a while since I’ve been back. Every full moon, these flowers glow and the zirelings leave their caves to cut them down.”

Cohrven settled another blanket over my back, and I curled into the warmth it provided.

For a long while, we watched the zirelings as they worked,

Cohrven sitting cross-legged beside me, unbothered by the chill of night. Then, a low, pure note stretched through the air. I tried to find the source, but soon they all started singing, their voices a melodic, wordless harmony.

I closed my eyes and listened carefully, the harsh sounds of work dulled by their song. It was slow at first, with lingering notes and low baritones, but as they sang their voices built up until my chest was lifting along with the beat. Cohrven was right about it being peaceful.

I turned my head to find that he was staring at me. He didn't glance away when I caught him, and we spent long moments looking into each other's eyes. One last high note hung in the air, and when it ended, Cohrven looked back to the zirelings.

"Have you figured out why I come here?" he asked.

"I feel small," I said. "I can't explain it. It's like nothing else matters but being here, right at this moment. Is that part of your reason?"

"It is, but there's more to it." He cleared his throat. "The zirelings are their own kingdom. They have a world deeply entwined with mine, but so separate at the same time. When my life is falling apart, the zirelings are still here, harvesting their flowers and singing their songs. Any problem I have, any mistake I make...it's nothing to them.

"That should make me feel insignificant, but it doesn't. Every time I see them, it reminds me that everything continues—that *I* continue. Through the worst parts of my life, I have still woken up in the morning, put one foot in front of the other, and walked out my bedroom door. And I am proud of that, if nothing else. I am proud of continuing."

I understood his unspoken implication: that I should be proud of continuing too.

I didn't know what to say, but I *did* know what I wanted to do. His profile was striking in the glow of the flowers. I ached to trail my hands through his thick black hair, to trace the curves of his neck, his jaw, his lips.

Clenching my eyes shut, I fought to stay lying where I was.



A tether was drawing me towards Cohrven. I contemplated what would happen if I gave in to its pull.

Would it really be so bad to kiss him? To *touch* him? I swallowed hard.

Cohrven stood abruptly, oblivious to my inner turmoil, and the tether snapped. As he watched the stars above, his back to me, the zirelings sang a new song, but this time grief rolled off their tongues with every mournful note, their haunting voices bringing tears to my eyes.

Even the zirelings felt sorrow. I no longer felt so alone with mine.

# Twenty-one

THERE WERE FAR more fae awake at dawn and gathered in the training yard than I had been expecting. Even though the sun was still dim on the horizon, globes of burning fire were suspended above the yard, making it bright. Nobles and peasants alike crowded against the wooden fence surrounding the ring, cheering and groaning at the outcomes of every match. Passing servants stalled in their duties, standing on their tiptoes to try and catch glimpses of the fighting.

I sat on a slate roof overhanging the yard, an easy illusion hiding me from everyone's sight. Cohrven was the only one who could see me, and every so often he glanced up, as if to ensure I was still there. He was training with a large young man with russet-brown skin, short copper hair coiled in tight curls, and a few days' worth of stubble on his face. The man was muscled like a bull and almost as tall as Cohrven, his fighting elegant and aggressive.

They both wore light armour made of black leather, with black linen trousers and tunics underneath, and their swords were blunted steel. They fought with dual broadswords, a speciality of both, I gleaned as I watched them spar, the steel flashing with blinding speed as they pushed each other back and forth. Even though Cohrven was a prince, in the yard he was only another soldier.

Cheers and gasps sounded from the crowd surrounding the spectacle of the training ring. Someone must have landed a particularly good hit. Loud applause soon followed, indicating that one of the fighters had finally triumphed over their opponent. None of the fights had been particularly interesting to me, so I had mostly been watching Cohrven and the fae who I assumed was his friend, based on how often they laughed together in between practicing forms.

Two figures in the back corner caught my attention after a loud clash of swords interrupted the cheering. They were sparring together, both garbed in fine black leather armour

carved with intricate geometric lines. The first wielded two broadswords, her black hair braided and coiled into a tight bun at the back of her head. She delivered a series of hard blows that her opponent blocked with his longsword, and as she twisted to avoid a rapid counterattack, I gaped when I saw her face.

Queen Aehla.

And King Heron.

Even from afar, I recognized his brown hair and full beard. They were fighting against one another, as fierce and disciplined as any of the soldiers surrounding them. When her husband shoved her into the dirt, Aehla sprung back up without hesitation and charged at him. When his wife caught him off balance and knocked him down, Heron's lips twitched into a proud smile that he quickly quashed before she could see.

Cohrven followed my line of sight to his parents. Instead of smiling in enjoyment of their fight, he frowned.

"Prince Cohrven. Rian." A general's voice beckoned them to the fighting ring. Cohrven and his friend jogged through the parting crowd, shouldering each other and talking the whole way. But as soon as they were standing opposite each other in the ring, that easy familiarity was gone.

The crowd was silent. Then Cohrven moved and everyone let out a collective breath. Rian could barely keep up with Cohrven's brutal stabs and slashes, scarcely deflecting each swing and staggering backwards with every block. Cohrven drove him to the edge of the ring, trapping him against the fence, and I thought the fight was going to be over as soon as it had begun.

But Rian crossed his blades and sent Cohrven stumbling back with a strong shove. Taking advantage of Cohrven's misstep, he jumped up off the fence, lunging and slashing down from above. Cohrven mouthed a curse as he bent backwards and twisted to the side, blocking Rian's swords and pivoting to face him again.

Fury flashed across Cohrven's face. The ground shook and fae yelped. Even Rian hesitated, backing away from the prince, swords raised to protect himself from a vicious onslaught. Rian couldn't know that Cohrven wasn't mad at him—he was mad at himself for being out of practice, for being weakened by my uncle's torture.

Cohrven inhaled a deep breath. Holding out his arms wide in a placating gesture, the ground stopped quaking and the crowd calmed again.

When Rian lunged towards him, Cohrven was ready. He grunted as he dodged Rian's swords, then caught them both with his own, stabbing forward along the blades and forcing Rian to leap backwards to avoid being hit.

Cohrven pushed him across the ring again, following every step Rian took backward with a forward one of his own. His swords were a flurry of steel; his muscles rippled with power and gleamed with sweat. I couldn't take my eyes off of him, and then I understood why he had invited me to training this morning, why he wanted me to watch.

I had seen him fight before, but each time he had been wounded and in a desperate battle for survival. He had been trying to climb a mountain, scrambling to find each foothold. But in the ring, he *was* the mountain. Rian was probably one of the most talented fighters in Liral, but Cohrven's strength and finesse were unparalleled.

And I was *impressed*.

Cohrven disarmed Rian, the latter's swords clattering against the dirt. With both of Cohrven's swords at his throat, Rian shouted his surrender and lifted his hands. There were no cheers.

Rian scowled when Cohrven winked at him and backed off, hopping out of the ring and resting his arms on the fence, waiting to watch the next fight. Rian went his separate way to cool off, stomping in the exact opposite direction until he disappeared behind the palace's walls.

I sat through a few more matches before growing bored.

Nothing could compare to watching Cohrven's grace, his strength. I almost thought he had left when I searched for him and couldn't find his thick black hair, feeling a sting of annoyance. I did find him, though, and my mouth went dry—he had gathered his hair into a short ponytail at the nape of his neck. He jerked his head in a subtle signal for me to follow him, and he looked so young and open, less of an intimidating prince and more of a carefree boy.

Which was more than a little dangerous. Because Cohrven was the Nightheart. I couldn't afford to forget, no matter how handsome he was, no matter how much I admired him. Fae gathered in the crowd gave him a wide berth as he departed, assuring me that I wasn't the only one who remained wary of him, and that I still had good reason to.

I flew above him, dropping to the floor only when we had reached his rooms. Yawning, I strolled through the door and let my illusion dissipate. Cohrven's swords hit the ground, startling me as he removed his leather breastplate and rolled his shoulders, following with a yawn of his own.

"You reek," I commented, wrinkling my nose at the rank odour wafting over to me.

"Good. I'm supposed to." He slumped onto a chair and motioned for me to continue, anticipating more questions.

"Do your parents spar together often?"

"Almost every day." His frown returned, accompanied by a wrinkle in his brow, though he didn't seem to be aware. "Except when I was captured. My mother was too upset to leave her room, and my father was too busy preparing for war."

That explained their intensity in the training yard. They hadn't been able to fight for months. Aehla's rage had been drowned by her sadness, and Heron's rage had been funnelled into the destruction of Sorcen. Finally, they had been able to unleash it together.

"Who was the fae you were sparring with?"

Cohrven's eyes lit up. "You'll find out."

I rubbed my tired eyes before swallowing another yawn. Our late night had been exhausting, and waking up early to watch the soldiers train had been difficult. “I should rest.”

“Actually, I thought that we c—” Cohrven cut himself off and cleared his throat. “Never mind.”

“No, what is it?”

“I was thinking that we could explore the Kalatain Caverns together,” he said, after some hesitation. “But we can do so some other time. I’d rather you rest.”

He fixed his eyes to the floor. My first impulse was to say that I would join him, but I kept my mouth closed. I couldn’t be alone with him, not after last night. My heartbeat stuttered when I remembered how I had wanted to kiss him. How I still wanted to kiss him.

“Some other time,” I said, unable to resist the promise of Cohrven’s company.

“Alright,” he acquiesced. The following silence was uncomfortable. I almost escaped to the bedroom, but I had to ask one nagging question.

“You said your father was preparing for war. Does that mean that at any time, if he gave the order, your forces would be ready to march on Sorcen?”

“Yes.” Cohrven stood and began pacing, my question setting him on edge for some unknown reason. “At any moment.”

“He won’t, though.” Panic began rising in my chest. “You promised me he wouldn’t.”

“Not yet,” he affirmed. “I’ve met with the War Council and talked them down from a pre-emptive strike every day since I’ve returned.”

Content with that answer, I released my held breath.

But Cohrven flared his wrecked wings in agitation, as if there was more. “I st—”

A horrible scream resonated through the room. Cohrven and I jolted, eyes going wide and swivelling to face the source. Val

was hunched by the door, on the verge of dropping to her knees. She covered her mouth with clawed fingers and screamed again, her eyes trained on Cohrven's destroyed wings.

## Twenty-two

SHE'S QUIET," COHRVEN said, without looking at me, as if it were a valid explanation for how she had snuck into his room unnoticed.

"Cohrven," she cried. "Your wings..."

Tears flowed from Val's eyes, running down her reddened cheeks, darkening the neck of her light blue dress. Cohrven's mouth opened and closed as he tried to think of how to respond.

"Val..." he started, but couldn't manage anything more.

"But they were fine. I saw them," Val blubbered. "How did you hide it? What happened to you?"

"I never wanted you to know about this," he finally said, as she sniffled. "You can't tell our parents. You can't tell *anyone*."

"Why?" She stepped forward fiercely, her expression feral. "I'll help you kill them."

"I made a promise." He gestured towards me and Val's gaze followed. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion bordering on revulsion. "Princess Valarie Dawnborn, may I present Princess Allina Kingsdaughter."

Val blinked for a few moments, furrowing her brows and frowning, the corner of her mouth lifting into the slightest sneer. I nodded my head in greeting, then she leapt at me. Before I could even think of moving, she tackled me to the floor, her knee pressing into my stomach, her hands grabbing my forearms and pinning them down.

"What did you do to my brother?" she yelled. She bared her teeth at me, her red face contorted with rage. I didn't know what to do, or what to say to her accusation. I didn't want to hurt her by fighting back, and she wasn't threatening my life—yet—so I didn't move.



“Tell me!” she yelled again. “How did you do it? Did your madness make you shred his wings?”

“Val, stop!” Cohrven shouted, already dashing towards us.

“I will kill you.” Val’s voice had quieted to a deathly calm. “I will kill everyone in the Sorcen Court.”

Then she froze.

“I’m sorry,” Cohrven said to his sister, and to a lesser extent, me. He pulled her off me gently, then unfroze her when he had a firm grip on her arms. I stood, shaken by her violent reaction, and moved behind the settee, putting some distance between us,

*My madness*, she had said.

“Why is the Kingsdaughter here, Cohrven?” She struggled against his hold, but he was too strong for her to escape.

“She didn’t shred my wings; she saved me from King Osreth. He’s proclaimed her a traitor and ordered her execution.”

“Her own uncle?” She stopped trying to rip away from Cohrven.

“Yes, my uncle,” I said, turning Val’s attention to me. “But he was going to have me killed anyway, so Cohrven’s escape was just a convenient excuse.”

She pursed her lips. “He hurt Cohrven.”

“Badly,” I agreed.

“Why did you save him?”

I hesitated before replying. The truth of Cohrven’s capture had to remain our secret. But Val had seen so much already, and she cared so deeply for her brother. “My uncle was torturing him in front of the entire court. It was brutal and cruel. I rescued him, but not before his wings were torn as part of the spectacle.”

For a moment, she scrutinized me. I returned her hard stare with one of my own. She looked up at Cohrven again. He nodded solemnly, corroborating my story, and her expression

opened up.

“Kingsdaughter, I apologize for attacking you,” she said in a tiny voice. “Please tell me what happened.”

Cohrven’s eyes met mine before going back to Val. “We’re not going to tell you anything more,” he said. Val pouted, her shoulders sagging with disappointment. “I was lucky Allina was there. Everything else that happened to me, I wish to forget.”

Wordlessly, Val flung her arms around Cohrven and hugged him as tight as she could. As he hugged her back, he looked at me from over her shoulder, checking to see if I was fine. I gave him a tight-lipped smile, letting him know that everything was alright.

“There’s someone I want you to meet,” he said to me. “I’ll be right back.”

Val released him and rolled her eyes.

Once he was out the door, Val sat on the settee beside me. I wracked my brain to find something to say, but she beat me to it.

“Your hair’s beautiful.” As she studied me, her head quirked to the side. “Your cousin, the Sunsdughter, does she have the same hair?”

“No, hers is pale blonde and straight, like the sun’s rays on a clear morning.” Thinking of Erelie made me sad, but I didn’t dwell in my melancholy. “My aunt has silver hair. She’s called Starfall because it looks like the tail of a star falling from the sky.”

“Is your family scared of you, Kingsdaughter?”

“I...” My throat tightened. “They weren’t. But I think that now they are. After what Cohrven and I had to do to escape them.”

“You’re not really mad, are you?” She leaned forward. “Everyone says you are, but it’s not true.”

“My father was mad,” I responded. The words were ingrained inside me. “*I am not.*” Wanting to leave the topic of

my family behind, I asked, “What’s your magic?”

“I’m quiet, like my brother said.” She pushed a book onto the floor, showcasing her magic when it crashed into the marble without a sound. “I inherited it from my mother. What’s yours?”

“I can make illusions.” There wasn’t any reason to hide my magic from her, now that she knew I existed. “It’s how I hid Cohrven’s wings.”

“Really? Wh—” She broke off when a golden-furred, wide-eyed puppy barked and stumbled towards her from across the room on stubby legs. Its belly was round, its ears flopped, and its tail wagged incessantly as it made its way towards Val. “Aww,” she cooed, kneeling on the ground and beckoning it closer. “How’d you get in here?” When it was almost to her lap, she reached out to pet its head. Her extended fingers brushed its forehead, and it disappeared. She let out a bloodcurdling shriek, raking through the spot where the puppy had been, but finding only empty air.

I made the puppy appear again, lumbering towards her exactly as it had before. Awed, she stared between it and me.

“You’re dangerous,” she stated. There was no fear in her voice. To her, it was a simple fact. “Like Cohrven.”

Blue Wings. The Stonewalker. I had killed them both. Without my illusions, many fae would still be alive. I *was* dangerous. And instead of protesting against becoming like the Nighthead, I accepted that part of me.

I wasn’t only the Kingsdaughter anymore. I was a powerful enemy, and a strong ally. For my whole life, I had only been what I thought others had wanted me to be—a refined princess, a mourning daughter, a polite niece, a loving cousin. Now that I was free of who I used to be, I could finally see who I had the chance to become.

“I am,” I said, without hesitation.

Pleased, Val sunk back into the plump cushions of the settee. Her eyes were bright and her smile was wide as she asked me her next question. “What do you think of my brother?”

I fumbled in my head for an answer she would like, but my face must have shown my true feelings.

Her warm expression turned to ice. “You’re just like *them*,” she said, every word soaked in hostility. “My brother’s better than *them*. He’s better than *you*.” And with that, she covered the side of her head with her black hair, hiding her face from me. We sat in tense silence until the door swung open. I hid myself with an illusion, but it was only Cohrven walking through the door with his sparring partner, Rian.

He wore a blacksmith’s apron dusted with soot, his brown skin still gleaming with sweat, as if Cohrven had plucked him from the forge. Cohrven was barely taller than him, but Rian was wide with defined muscle. He should have been intimidating in his size and his strength, but his smile was warm, and he walked in an easy, relaxed manner.

Rian entered, nodded to Val, then surveyed the room, looking very confused once he was done. He pursed his lips and shook his head, eyeing Cohrven with scepticism. Clearing his throat, he put a hand on Cohrven’s shoulder.

“Listen, Cohrven,” he started, his voice full of sympathy, “I know you haven’t—” He looked at Val and seemed to reconsider his words, “—*entertained a companion* in many years, but you can’t just make up an imaginary one.”

Cohrven dragged a hand over his face and turned his eyes to the ceiling with a groan.

“Please,” was all he said. I knew it was directed at me.

“You’re my brother, Cohrven.” Rian glanced at Val again, then added, “Metaphorically, of course. And I completely understand why your mind would go to such lengths. It’s fine. I *will* help you get through this.”

Val finally understood what was going on and started laughing.

That’s when I decided to let my illusion go. When I appeared, Rian yelped and jumped backwards, causing Cohrven to crack a smile. Rian stared at me like I had wings sticking out of my ears.

“You...” He squinted at me. “Are you real?”

Cohrven sighed. “Rian, meet—”

“Kaila,” I interrupted, cutting him off. Val, I trusted. She would keep any secret that protected Cohrven. But Rian, I didn’t know anything about.

“Kaila,” Cohrven mimicked. “This is Rian, my closest friend.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kaila,” Rian said, staring at me strangely, with his head cocked to the side and a suppressed smile threatening to break free.

“Likewise.” I tried to avoid eye contact as his eyes narrowed and his lips pursed.

“Cohrven, Val, I need you,” Queen Aehla called from outside the door, wing beats getting closer.

“One moment, Mother!” Cohrven yelled back, already running to the door and gesturing for Val to hurry behind him. Then they were out the door and I was left alone with Rian. He sat on the settee, an arm’s length away. I could feel his stare glued to my face.

“Did Cohrven pick you up on his journey back to Hjairn?” he asked, then quickly answered himself. “Of course, he had to have done so. I’ve never seen you around before.”

I finally turned to him. “What do you mean?”

“You know.” He winked at me. “Cohrven hasn’t been this happy, ever. I didn’t understand why he was acting so damn weird, but now I do.”

“He’s acting differently?”

“Sometimes, I see him smiling to himself. When he’s just standing there, alone, looking off into the distance, he’ll just start smiling at absolutely nothing. Cohrven doesn’t smile; at least, he didn’t. I thought King Osreth had tortured him into madness and he was hiding it very well.” He gave a contented sigh. “Now I know that it’s just you he’s smiling about.”

“Me?” My heart pounded faster. Rian only smirked.

“So, how long have you been in Cohrven’s company? Has he been keeping you in his rooms this whole time?” Rian chuckled, pleased for his friend. “It’s good that he’s finally living a little.”

My jaw almost dropped to the floor. “I’m not his... *whore*,” I gasped, my cheeks reddening in embarrassment.

“I won’t tell anyone, Kaila.”

“*I am not!*” I enunciated every syllable.

“Fine.” He raised his hands in surrender. “You’re beautiful, he’s hidden you in his rooms, and I just assumed that he brought you here as, uh, well...”

“Does he do that often?” I tried to sound disinterested, but curiosity burned through me, kindled by a rising jealousy. Rian had jumped to his conclusion rather quickly.

“Oh, he never has.”

I let out a discreet breath of relief. But then I really thought about Cohrven’s appearance, his status. “You’re a liar.”

“I’m not lying,” Rian protested. “As I’m sure you’re well aware, very few women want to bed an irritable, angry man with a violent reputation.”

I couldn’t disagree. He opened his mouth to speak again, but I held my hand up. “Please don’t.” Nodding meekly, he clasped his hands together on his lap. I turned and stood with my back to him.

When Cohrven came through the door, he paused and surveyed the tense scene. “Rian, what have you done?” Behind Cohrven, the door slammed shut so hard it shook.

“I said nothing not already implied,” Rian said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Rian, I swear...” Cohrven’s eyes flared, but instead of continuing, he just shook his head, then deadpanned: “May I present Princess Allina Kingsdaughter.”

Rian’s eyes bulged. “The Kingsdaughter? Here?” He gawked at me, even under Cohrven’s harsh glare. “How is that

possible? You said you escaped Osreth by yourself, Cohrven.”

“I lied.” Cohrven shrugged off his dishonesty. “Without Allina, I would be dead.”

“Kingsdaughter.” Rian knelt in front of me and bowed his head. “Thank you for saving Cohrven. I am truly sorry for making untoward assumptions.”

“You’re forgiven,” I said, with lingering uncertainty. Rian hadn’t been truly wrong in his assessment, not with the way I had been feeling. “Stand, please,” I begged. Thankfully, he did.

“We’ll talk later, Rian,” Cohrven said—a kind, but clear, dismissal. Rian winced and nodded, then scurried out the door.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Cohrven started to laugh. He grasped the back of the settee for support and bent forwards, clutching his side. I appreciated his beautiful, happy face for a moment before irritation took over. “What’s so amusing, Cohrven Nighthead?”

“You. Rian. *Untoward assumptions*,” he sputtered out, still in throes of laughter.

“That was not funny,” I said seriously, then promptly broke into a grin as I pictured Rian’s befuddled face. Cohrven was contagious. “Stop laughing,” I commanded, while laughing. The order wasn’t very effective.

After a moment, Cohrven calmed down.

“Can you trust him?” I asked. I was certain the King and Queen wouldn’t be pleased with Cohrven hiding the presence of one of the Sorcen Court’s princesses from them. They could never find out, at least not until I was halfway across the ocean, on my way to the human territories.

“I trust Rian just as much as I trust Val and my mother,” Cohrven said, any traces of amusement gone. He hadn’t mentioned his father, which I thought unusual. “He’s an intelligent soldier and a loyal best friend. Our secrets are safe with him.”

He ruffled his hair with a hand. “I just wish you two had

gotten off to a better start.”

“That is not my fault.”

“I know,” he said. “I know.” Light laughter escaped his lips again before he bit it back. “I’ll be out late tonight, so don’t wait up for me.”

He was gone just as quickly as he had finished speaking. And it took until my jaw started aching much later to realize I hadn’t stopped smiling.



# Twenty-three

I MUFFLED MY movements with an illusion as I slid open the door to Cohrven's sitting room. He hadn't returned last night, judging by the undisturbed sheets on his bed. Irritation boiled through me as my imagination immediately supplied all the places he could have been, but it quickly disappeared when I trudged into his sitting room and his large body was sprawled across his too-small settee.

One of his legs was dangling over an armrest, the other was completely off the settee, his foot flat on the floor. His neck was bent at an uncomfortable angle, his arms flung across his clothed chest. He hadn't wanted to wake me up last night, that was all. My relief was palpable, but the reason for that relief left a bitter taste in my mouth. I didn't bother to glance at his face before leaving.

Breakfast was tasteless. My flight through the gardens was rushed. By the time I stepped back inside the castle, the sun was still rising, and I was restless.

I wandered the halls aimlessly, avoiding hurried servants and careless nobles. Around the twentieth floor, black hair flashed in the corner of my vision, and I watched Cohrven disappear from the twentieth balcony into a long corridor. I followed him, curious as to why he was lurking.

Eventually, I ended up in an empty wing. There were no cobwebs on the ceiling, and no dust on the floor, but it felt like a sparse, yawning cavern that had been forgotten long ago.

A door banged open in the distance, shaking the floor. Muted shouts erupted farther down the hall. Two fae with deep voices were arguing, but I couldn't make out anything they were saying.

I flew to the end of the hall and around the corner as the shouting increased in volume, then went slack-jawed as Cohrven stood with his father in front of me. They faced each other, their hands clenched in tight fists, veins standing out in

their reddened necks. The wooden door still quivered behind them.

“You have no right to question me!” Cohrven yelled, his teeth bared in a snarl.

“I have every right!” Heron yelled back. “Don’t forget that *I am your king*. And if that weren’t enough, you are *my son*. You answer to *me*.”

“No, I don’t,” Cohrven growled. “I don’t owe you my obedience. I don’t owe you *anything*.”

“Son—”

“How am I different?” Cohrven shouted, his voice breaking. “Am I not still exactly what you want me to be?”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Heron said calmly, turning his open palms to Cohrven in a placating gesture, his anger dissipating as he tried to control Cohrven’s rage.

Cohrven advanced on his father, and even though they were of the same height, Heron cowered from his son. “Yes, you did. You meant every word!”

A tall white vase next to them in the hallway flew and shattered against the stone wall, the cracked pieces hovering in the air and disintegrating further as Cohrven slammed the pieces against the wall again, and again, until sand fell to the floor.

“Even if I *was* different, wouldn’t you want that? Wouldn’t you want me to be *happy*? Wouldn’t you want me to stop driving away *everyone* and *everything* that surrounds me?”

“Cohrven, your hatred has made you who you are. If you let it go, you’ll have nothing—you’ll *be* nothing.”

“Maybe I’d rather be nothing. Maybe I’d rather just die.”

“Don’t you dare say that!” the King snapped. “I already thought I lost you once.”

“And instead of mourning, you used me as an excuse.”

Heron raised his hand, and I thought he was going to slap Cohrven. He held himself back, though, and lowered it again.

“Do you honestly think I was the only one calling for blood? Your mother was rabid. Your sister wanted Osreth’s head. You should want to destroy him.”

“I do.”

“Then why aren’t you? Our army could be halfway to the Sorcen Court right now if you hadn’t convinced the War Council to change their plans.”

“If an attack is warranted when I return, I won’t stop you. I’ll bury Sorcen alive.”

Rage blasted through me like I was a dry piece of wood being inflamed by a spark.

The King nodded in approval. He reached a hand out to Cohrven’s shoulder, but Cohrven yanked himself away before it could land.

“I’m leaving early in the morning,” Cohrven said, distancing himself even farther.

“Won’t you let a detail escort you?”

“No.” Cohrven’s face was a cold mask. “Don’t you remember what happened last time?”

The King winced and didn’t say another word.

“I would like to be alone.”

“Fine,” Heron replied, his tone biting. Deep in thought, the King stalked past me. Though his pace was quick, he walked hunched over, cowed by Cohrven’s harshness.

When I found Cohrven again, he was disappearing through the door he and his father had burst through. I stalked after him and found myself in a room full of old furniture half-covered with white sheets.

“Liar!” I yelled, making myself visible. Cohrven whipped around to face me, shock written across his features. “You’ll bury Sorcen alive?” Fire raced through my blood. “You’ll attack with your army, even after everything I’ve done for you? And you’re leaving tomorrow? Without telling me?”

“Allina—”

“Go to the Wither and rot by yourself.” Why else would Cohrven be leaving, if not in search of the Wither? He had lied to me, over and over again.

“You spied on me,” Cohrven said, dangerously calm. He rolled his shoulders and tilted his head to both sides, cracking his neck.

“Of course I did,” I said. He clenched his jaw in response. “Who would ever trust the Nightheart?”

“I was only telling my father what he wanted to hear.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then don’t!” he exploded. “Don’t believe a word I say. Don’t come near me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t even look at me. Run away and die in the human territories. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“I want to run *far* away.” I said it as if it was the truth. “I never want see you again.”

Cohrven sneered. “They kept me drugged, your uncle’s soldiers. Whenever I opened my eyes, everything was a blur. I was paralyzed. I couldn’t use my magic. I couldn’t even move my tongue to speak. I was beaten, cut, starved, spit on, *pissed* on. I had done *nothing* to them. I had done *nothing* to your uncle.

“You didn’t see any of it. He had me cleaned up before his big show. For weeks, I was tortured. After that, don’t you understand why I’d want to kill your uncle and destroy your court? I have the strength to do it. I have an army willing to fight for me the moment I call upon them.

“But I’m not going to. I will defend Liral from Sorcen, but I won’t attack. Because of you, Allina. You are the only thing stopping me. I told you I would keep my promise, and I have. I don’t care if you believe me or not.”

The haunting pain in his dark eyes crushed me. “You never told me any of that.”

“You didn’t need to know,” he rumbled, eyes meeting the floor. White fire blazed in the marrow of my bones. I could

decide what I needed to know for myself.

“Just like I didn’t need to know about the Wither? Or about how you were leaving to find it?” The second hurt me more than the first. Even though anger overrode any lingering emotion I felt, I didn’t want him to leave, couldn’t even imagine waking up tomorrow to find him gone. He wasn’t even planning to tell me.

“You’ve fulfilled the terms of our deal, and after I leave tomorrow, you can do whatever you want, go wherever you want,” he said, his voice monotone, eyes devoid of anything resembling an emotion. “If you’re not here when I return, so be it.” He paused. Exhaled deeply. “Actually, that might be for the best.”

Maybe he didn’t care after all then. Maybe I was nothing to him—just a convenient saviour.

“It’s no wonder everyone hates you.” I hoped my words stung. “You take every opportunity you have to be mean and dreadful and terrifying.

“I could have left you.” Even as I said it, I knew it never could have been a possibility, but I wanted to alleviate my pain by inflicting it on him. “I could have left you to die and I would have been better off for it.”

He actually looked taken aback for a moment, before smoothing his features once again. “That was wrong...” he said. “What I just said, about you leaving, I was wrong.”

“No, you were *right*.”

His expression hardened. “I *was* wrong,” he said again, louder. “You’ve seen me, Allina. I am a nasty wretch. I hurt everyone. I scare everyone. There is hatred in my heart, and it has been festering inside me for so long I hardly know anything else. You know what I said to my father. He said I would be nothing if I purge the anger, the loathing, the *suffering* that I have held on to for so long.” He looked to the wall. “Maybe once, I would have believed him, but now it sounds like the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

He ran a hand through his hair and met my gaze again. “I am

sorry. Words don't mean anything, but I will make up for everything I've done, if you'll let me."

The way he was looking at me, so sincere, so hopeful, made my breath catch in the way that I had been trying to avoid.

I wanted to forgive him. So, I thought of the awful things he had done, because I shouldn't want to. Because I was a filthy coward.

Nightheart. Bury Sorcen alive. Casualties of war. Knives flying towards me. Break my arm. Wings stabbed through branches like ornaments. My passion blurred into anger again.

"Chaos and terror are all that you're made of, all that you bring to everyone around you." He flinched like he had been punched. "Everything that you are, you've built. You want to be terrifying. You want to be angry."

"I don't." His expression was darkening again. "I just am. A storm is in my head. It's been there for years."

"Since when?" He remained silent, his lips pressed tight together. "Since you stabbed your older brother? Since you killed him and everyone despised you for it?"

"You know nothing about my brother!" he roared. The floor started to shake, mortar dust clouding the room.

I gripped the wall to keep my footing. "I've heard enough. Besides, why would you still be called the *Nightheart* if it wasn't a warning?" I threw his own words back at him and his face twisted. His fury was palpable, shaking Sky's End down to its foundation, but my anger allowed no fear.

"Maybe you should have heeded that warning before you saved my life," he said, his voice quieting. "Do you not think I dream of who I could have become every single day?"

Shame coloured my cheeks and guilt made my stomach turn. He wasn't allowed to make me feel this way, like my chest was flayed open. I channelled the emotions churning inside me and used them to fuel white-hot rage. I spread my wings and took to the air, leaving him far behind.

Through the halls, out the back entrance—my body knew

where I was going before my mind did. The cemetery loomed in front of me. I barrelled past the twin obsidian mausoleums to the farthest corner, disobeying Cohrven. It felt good.

His brother's tomb glinted in the sun, the grey stone so plain compared to all the grand structures surrounding it. I couldn't get there fast enough. Cohrven had killed his brother. He had killed his brother and his family didn't care.

I dropped to the ground and ran to the front of the mausoleum, searching for a name, dates, anything carved into the stone. The front was smooth.

I rushed to the side. Nothing. The back. Nothing. The other side. Nothing. The roof. *Nothing*.

I flew in circles around the structure until my head spun. Returning to the front, I punched the hard stone and pulled at my hair. Frustration made me clench my fists until my hands started shaking.

Cohrven's brother was meant to be forgotten, as if his life had been a stain his parents tried to scrub away when he died. I didn't understand it. Since Cohrven was so reviled, his brother must have been well known across Liral, and loved by his subjects.

So why had he been left to rot as a nameless corpse? There were three fae I could ask. One I had just fought with and never wanted to talk to again, one hated me because she thought I hated her brother, and one had thought that I was Cohrven's intimate companion. I unclenched my fists and sighed, then went to find Val.

# Twenty-four

IT TOOK A while, but I finally spotted Val's long black hair as she fluttered through the halls, wearing a gauzy lilac dress with puffed sleeves. I caught up to her and made myself visible to her eyes only.

"Val," I called. She looked over at me and almost crashed into the wall beside her, recovering quite gracefully as she looped to avoid the collision.

"Yes, Kingsdaughter?"

"I need to talk to you."

She pursed her lips then nodded. "Follow me." She grinned wickedly. "*If* you can."

With a flap of her wings, she halted in the air and I blew past her. When I turned around, she was already halfway up the hall.

I flew like I had the wind at my back, but still she managed to pull away from me. Panting, I fought to keep her in my sight. Fortunately, when I felt that my lungs were going to burst, she looked back at me with a smirk and dropped to a balcony about thirty floors up.

I copied her, taking in ragged breaths as I landed and braced myself against the mural painted on the wall in front of her bedroom. The colours were vibrant, and I was drawn to the beautiful sunrise.

Hundreds of slightly different shades of pink, orange, and red blended seamlessly with one another. The sparse pine forest glowed orange with the sun's light as it started to rise. Life began with that light. Creatures in the forest would wake, the trees would drink its dim rays, and insects would start to fill the silence with their steady hum.

"My grandmother painted it, before I was born," Val explained. "Do you like it, Kingsdaughter?"



“It’s a beautiful sunrise.”

Her brows furrowed, then smoothed again. “The sun isn’t rising. It’s setting.”

“How can you tell?”

“Can’t you see it?” She ran her hand across the setting sun. “My grandmother wanted to capture the peace the sun brings as it leaves the world for the night. When the sun sets, life slows down. She believed that the most beautiful thing about the sun is that it always rises. The world goes to sleep knowing that the sun will be there the next morning. Even in Liral, where we’re caught in perpetual dusk.”

As she spoke, I could see it then—the sun dipping below the horizon, the crescent moon and the twinkling stars lighting up the world in their muted way. Under the night sky with Cohrven and the zirelings I had felt calm for the first time since I left the Sun Palace.

“I have to ask you something.” Thinking of Cohrven made my voice weak.

“Come inside.” Val beckoned me to follow her into her rooms. They were just as messy as Cohrven’s, but along with countless books there were potted plants stacked on every spare table and shelf. As I walked by a plant with short, stubby leaves, one of its buds bloomed and exploded in the same breath, showering me with thin yellow petals.

I jumped away, shielding my face, and screeched at the suddenness. Val laughed maniacally. Once I realized there was no threat, I watched as the other buds exploded. The petals soared high into the air and fluttered to the ground like shattered pieces of a falling star.

After the plants were done blooming, I sat on the armrest of Val’s green velvet daybed and tried to pick petals from my hair. I knew I was failing miserably when Val skipped over to me and began to help.

“What was that?” I asked.

“A Sunburst,” she supplied. “They grow on the coast. The first one I ever received was a present from my cousins that

live in Davjar. From that first one, I grew four more. They bloom whenever they feel like it, without any rhyme or reason. It's always a surprise."

Heart-stopping seemed to be a more accurate description than something as tame as *surprise*.

"You have so many plants," I observed, her rooms making me feel like I was back in Suntrul during the summer, when the ground was grown tall with greenery and the trees were wrapped with ivy.

"I do," Val agreed, beaming proudly. "You want to know why, don't you?"

"Of course."

"It's a hobby I picked up when I was young. Cohrven and I were walking in a field with my cousins and the whole field started exploding with petals." She mimicked the flowers by throwing her hands up. "Our screams were so loud they echoed off the cliffs and Cohrven froze every single petal in the air. My cousins laughed so hard they rolled across the ground. To commemorate that moment, they gave each of us a Sunburst. I have Cohrven's here too."

I smiled as I imagined Cohrven freezing the petals in the air. He would have been so serious, treating the petals as if poison was dripping from them. Later, he would have laughed about it with his cousins, but in that moment, he would have done anything to keep his family safe from any threat he perceived, and that part... was more admirable than funny.

"And so, I started collecting plants," Val continued. "They give me something to do when Cohrven's gone hunting down criminals and monsters. Without me, these plants will die—well, except for the Nipuan cactus. Keeping them alive gives me a sense of accomplishment, I suppose."

She plucked what I assumed was the last petal from my golden tresses and plopped down on the daybed beside me, tucking a loose strand of black hair behind her ear.

Tiny freckles were dusted across the bridge of her nose, reminding me of Erelie. A pang of longing surged through my

chest. I missed my cousin. I had never been without her for so long.

Val wrinkled her nose when she saw me staring. “What do you want to know, Kingsdaughter?”

The words stuck in my throat for a moment. “W-why d-did...” I stuttered as her brown eyes bore into mine. They were the same colour as Cohrven’s. “I want to know why Cohrven killed your older brother.”

Her face collapsed into anguish. “I can’t talk about it. Every time I remember, I...I...” Her chest began heaving, her breaths coming fast and cumbersome. “I feel like I can’t breathe,” she gasped, clutching at her chest with her hands, wrinkling the front of her dress.

Panic split my brain. Her eyes were trained on me, wide with terror. “Who should I bring?”

She shook her head frantically. “N-no.”

“It’s going to be alright,” I said, trying to reassure her, not knowing if that was true. I reached my hands out to her uselessly and she lunged at me, burying her face in my neck. She held on to me with a vise grip, her tiny body shaking against mine, each convulsion sharp and uncontrollable.

“I’m so sorry, Val.” I wrapped her tight in my arms and stroked her hair. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“N-no,” she stammered, teeth chattering. “T-this is *not* your fault.” After a long moment, her violent tremors ceased, and she pulled away from me, blinking back tears. “Cohrven will tell you if you ask him. Don’t be afraid.”

I grimaced. Of course I was afraid to ask Cohrven about his brother. I didn’t know how he would react, especially after our fight. If I had to ask him in order to get an answer, I didn’t know if I even wanted one anymore.

“It’s not true,” Val said, sniffing. She closed her eyes and fought to keep from panicking again. “Everything they say about Cohrven, it’s not true.” When I looked to my lap, she took hold of my shoulders. “Believe me, Kingsdaughter. Cohrven can pretend all he likes, but he’s not a monster.

You've seen him. You know."

"I know," I agreed, so quiet I could barely hear myself speak.

"He was scared," she said. "And I... I can't... I can't..."

"Stop thinking about it," I begged. If she started convulsing again, I would hate myself even more. "You've told me enough."

She nodded, and recovered too quickly, hopping off the couch and searching for something. When she found a tin watering can with a dented side, she held it out to me with a toothy, forced smile. "This is for you." I took it with a questioning frown. "Water the tall, leafy plants. I'll take care of the picky ones."

"I thought you didn't trust me." Certainly, I didn't think she trusted me enough to water her plants.

With a huff, she crossed her arms. "Kingsdaughter, you saved Cohrven's life. I'm indebted to you."

"Don't be." I wasn't worthy of her gratitude, not after every nasty thing I'd said to Cohrven earlier.

"Too late." She left me to find a watering can for herself. "It takes longer than you think it will."

Val was right. By the time I had watered the last plant, my back was sore from being bent over for so long, and my arm hurt from hanging in a suspended position. I dropped the watering can to the floor and arched my back, twisting side-to-side and sighing when it cracked.

Prodding the soil in a clay pot with her fingers, Val hummed and watered a tiny sprout. Dirt was rubbed across her forehead and smeared down her cheeks. Just like Erelie, she was so bright, so happy. What had she seen that could affect her so drastically?

"Rian's usually in the armoury during the afternoon," she said, setting her watering can down. "Fly to the first floor and keep left from the grand hallway, and you can't miss the clanging."

“How did you know I was going to him next?”

She answered with a shrug. “Despite his first impression, Rian is wonderful, and his little sister is my best friend. Decide for yourself, of course, but know that he’s like family to me and Cohrven.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I truly didn’t mind Rian himself—what I minded was how perceptive he was.

“Visit me again, Kingsdaughter.” Val looked up from her task to grin at me.

“Call me Allina. Please.”

“I will.” Her smile turned shy. “Allina.”

My hand was on the brass door handle when I steeled myself and said, “Val, I hope we can be friends.”

“We already are, aren’t we?”

Hiding my face, I didn’t let her see the emotion flooding through me, showing plainly in the tears gathering in my eyes.

Belonging swelled in my chest.

After weeks of feeling adrift, I began to see the new life I could have in Liral. Roaming the streets of Hjairn with Val. Bickering with Cohrven. Joking around with Rian. For a moment, that vision of my future seemed almost fated. But without Erelie, nothing would ever be right.

“Yes, we are.” I hoped my cheerful tone disguised my quaking voice. My bottom lip quivered.

“You don’t have to leave,” she blurted out. Her next words came in a rush. “Cohrven told me you were going to leave Sky’s End soon, but you can stay with us. We’ll keep you safe from your uncle.”

*My uncle.* Even in Liral, I would be reminded of him every day—every time I saw Cohrven’s face, every time I heard his name casually spoken by the King, I would think of him and Erelie and all that I had lost. At Sky’s End, I would be haunted by them. At Sky’s End, I would never forget.

“I can’t.” I flung the door open. “I’m sorry.”

Like the coward that I was, I cloaked myself in an illusion  
and flew away as fast as I could.

## Twenty-five

JUST AS VAL said, I could hear the loud ring of steel on steel before I reached the end of the hall. I didn't really want to see Rian anymore, but I forced myself to fly forwards, wiping my tears as I landed, squared my shoulders, and slipped into the armoury.

Surprisingly, it was empty of soldiers. Racks of oiled swords, untouched shields, gleaming armour, and a variety of other weapons stood in orderly, unending rows. Low torchlight lit the windowless room, making it bright enough that I could see where I was heading.

Following the clanging took me to the back corner, where Rian was hunched over a forge by himself, bringing a hammer down against a glowing orange blade resting on an anvil. He was alone, so I altered my illusion to let him see me.

Intense heat washed over me as I neared him. Sweat poured down his body in rivulets. He set the hammer to the side, then turned away, searching for something. At the same time, he grasped the glowing steel. I screamed, waiting for his fingers to sizzle and blister.

His hand only clenched the metal harder. He pivoted towards me, holding the heated blade up as a weapon before lowering it to stare in bewilderment. "Kingsdaughter?"

"Please call me Allina." I wiped sweat from my brow as Rian took a deep breath. The sweltering heat disappeared instantly, replaced by refreshing coolness. That was when I noticed there was no fire burning in the small forge. "Your magic..."

"Heat," Rian provided. "I can give and take heat. From objects, from air, from fae—though that's difficult. It's easier if whatever I'm using my magic on is stationary, and fae usually start flailing when they get burnt." He looked to the ground sheepishly. "I heat the greenhouses whenever the temperature drops too low. Food is difficult to grow when the

days are short and the sun is weak. It's the very least I can do to help."

That was the first time I'd heard about the availability of food being a problem in the Liral Court. Everything I'd eaten so far had been delicious, and the kitchen was stuffed with fresh ingredients, but I wondered how much of an effort the royal family made to keep the fae of Liral from starving, and how much more of an effort they made to keep up the appearance that Liral was plentiful. And how much better off Heron would be if he were to overthrow my uncle and claim Sorcen as his.

"I had assumed you were a soldier with Cohrven's squad."

"No, I'm not in the Arch Drakar." Rian's chest puffed up with pride. "But I am a soldier of the Ground Battalion. I wish I could join Cohrven, but I can't travel fast enough with these."

He turned around, and it took me a moment to realize why—his wings weren't fully grown. Two round, translucent wing membranes the size of my fist extended through his shirt. Not torn, like Cohrven's, but underdeveloped. He had never been able to fly.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't even realize—"

"It's fine," Rian interrupted, facing me again. "I won't pretend that I'm not bitter about being stuck on the ground watching everyone else soar, but I get to stay home with my little sister this way."

Before I could ask about his sister, a throaty growl sounded right next to my ear. I yelped as something landed on my shoulder with a light pinprick of claws and wound around the back of my neck, crawling beneath the curtain of my hair before licking my cheek with a wet, sand-like tongue.

I twisted my head back and forth, shrieking and trying to pull the creature off me, but I only managed to brush my fingers against its soft fur before it hopped from my shoulder towards Rian's outstretched arms. He caught the creature by its armpits, holding it in place as it struggled for freedom.



A lean body of fluffy, smoke-gray fur gave way to four legs with oversized paws bearing tiny claws. Gray wings reminiscent of a bat's drooped from its back. A fluffy tail hung the same length as its body, twitching back and forth. Its ears were large compared to its head, ending in fluffy points.

"Don't jump on strangers," Rian chastised, looking the creature in the eyes. Its struggling ceased.

"*Mrow.*" The creature sounded more annoyed than repentant.

"Apologize." Rian turned the creature to face me. Its blue eyes were wide, the dark pupils contracted to vertical slits. Its nose was short and pink, and long black whiskers sprouted from its face.

"*Mrow.*" Based on the show of fangs, the sound definitely wasn't an apology.

"What is it?" I asked, too fascinated to be fearful. I reached towards its head and it sniffed me, its moist nose nudging my fingertips.

"A furfal. They can only be found high in the mountains." The furfal struggled against Rian's hold again, and Rian flung it high into the air. Spreading its wings, the furfal glided away from us, until it perched on a shelf overlooking the door.

"Cohrven found him injured and alone on one of his missions, far from any mountain. He healed him, then brought him home as a gift for Terra, my sister. Val named him *Silfvi*, for his dashing fur."

Silfvi let out a mewl at the mention of his name.

Rian laughed, his face brightening at an old memory. "Cohrven would never admit it, but he adores Silfvi. When he was first learning to fly, we lost him and spent the entire day searching the palace. The whole time, he was curled up on Cohrven's bed, sleeping underneath his blankets."

*Cohrven.* My stomach started churning again as I recalled the reason for my visit. It was so easy to put off my question, to let Rian offer me insight into his and Cohrven's past, but I had to ask him before I lost my resolve.

“Why did Cohrven kill his brother?”

“That’s his story to tell, not mine.” Rian’s happy disposition disappeared as he gazed at me with hard eyes. “You want to know, you ask Cohrven. Not me.”

“What if he won’t tell me?”

“*Oh, he will.*”

“I asked Val.” Rian sucked in a breath and his face fell. “I know I shouldn’t have. Her reaction... I feel so guilty.”

“Don’t feel guilty. You didn’t know.” He pursed his lips. “Trauma like that... It’s stayed with her, as it’s stayed with Cohrven.”

“You’re his friend.”

“His *best* friend.” He put on a show of being offended.

“Why aren’t you scared of him?”

“Cohrven’s magic does scare me.” My eyes widened at Rian’s admission. “Any moment, he could break me before I had the chance to blink. He could turn the world inside out if he wanted to. Wouldn’t that scare anyone?”

I nodded.

“But Cohrven himself doesn’t scare me, for the most part. There’s always something lurking beneath his skin, but he keeps it under control. I think he’s terrified that he has some of Ehren inside him.”

“Ehren?” I asked. Instant regret filled Rian’s face. “Who’s Ehren?”

“No one.”

“Rian, tell me who Ehren is right now.”

With a strangled groan, Rian rubbed his forehead with a hand, smudging ash across his brown skin. “Cohrven’s older brother.”

My world tilted. I finally knew his name. “Why would Cohrven be terrified of being like his brother? What did his brother do?”

“I’m not telling you anything more.”

“Just—”

“*Ask Cohrven*,” he said—a clear ultimatum. Then he turned back to the forge, and that was that. I knew if I tried to prod for more information, he would only ignore me.

But before I could leave the room, his voice broke the silence. “Cohrven looks like him.” Rian kept his back to me. “Ehren was stockier at sixteen, but they could have been twins at that age.” His shoulders sagged. “On Cohrven’s sixteenth birthday, I found him in his rooms. Glass shards covered every surface, in a layer so thick it looked like it had been snowing. He was sitting in the middle of the carnage with his face in his hands, his skin beaded with blood from a thousand cuts. The windows, the mirrors, anything that showed his reflection—he had shattered them all.”

Rian cleared his throat, choking down the rising emotion cracking his voice. “When Cohrven sees himself, he sees all that Ehren was and he knows all that Ehren could have become. Nothing keeps him in check more than that. Nothing *scares* him more than that.”

The singing steel told me he was done talking.

Silfvi observed me as I left—another thing that was loved by Cohrven. Another facet of his life.

How much more didn’t I know? How much more would he bother to tell me?

Rian was right—I would never know until I asked.

## Twenty-six

UNDER THE WEAK sun, I lay on the short, discoloured grass in some forgotten, quiet corner of the gardens and closed my eyes. I sifted through my conversations with Val and Rian, gathering both of their stories into a coherent narrative.

Val had witnessed Cohrven kill Ehren. I hadn't been told so explicitly, but based on her terror and Rian's comment, it was obvious. She would have been so young—just five years old. The same age I had been when I lost my parents.

I could still hear my mother's screams from the other side of my door. They were horrendous, but the following silence was far worse. When everything was silent, I could hear the thumps of bodies hitting the floor, the muffled yelling, the door splintering open and crashing against the wall.

I saw a bloodied hand reaching from beyond the doorway, towards me, before being wrenched back, out of my sight. A glimpse of my father's enraged face, his pupils swimming with gray smoke.

Osreth had burst into my room, his eyes wild with grief, fearing that I had suffered the same fate as my mother. When he saw that I wasn't hurt, he collapsed to his knees and held me tight. Before then, I had never seen a grown-up cry.

Walking out of that room, he had tucked my face into his chest and made sure that I never saw my parents' bodies, or the blood, or the horror-struck fae crowding the room and ogling. Once we were in his chambers, he had told me that my parents were dead, that I would never see them again, with a strained voice. Even as young as I was, I understood. I bawled until my throat was raw and my eyes were so swollen I couldn't even open them.

All night, Osreth had stayed with me, delaying his coronation until the next morning. With my whole heart, I knew he hadn't wished to find me lying in a pool of blood on the floor, broken and not breathing.

But he had changed his mind. That was all that mattered. I rolled onto my side, clutching my knees and tucking my chin to my chest.

How could I stop loving him when I knew without a doubt he had loved me? If I was going to live through his rejection, I had to fill myself with mindless rage and bitter hatred, instead of hollow despair. Like Cohrven said, if Osreth truly did love me, he wouldn't trade my life for any reason—he wouldn't even consider the possibility.

My stomach sank as Cohrven invaded the melancholy of my thoughts.

I had been unfair to him.

He had been sincere when he apologized, and I had tormented him in exchange. That cruel, vindictive fae wasn't who I wanted to be.

Standing up took all my remaining effort as shame coursed through me again, willing me to do anything but return to Cohrven. I hardened myself with a few deep breaths. With bones made of lead, I lifted off and flew to find him.

Before I opened the cracked door, I hesitated. Our fight had been... horrid, but that felt so long ago. Surely he had calmed down by now, just like I had.

He was lounging on one of his leather chairs, an open book in one hand, a downturned, empty wine glass dangling from the other, his fingers barely gripping the delicate stem. With clear disinterest, he looked from the book to me, then back to the pages. When I stepped closer, the strong scent of alcohol overwhelmed my senses.

"Leave me be," he said, no slur evident in his gravelly voice. Again, he looked at me, but this time chose to hold my stare instead of declaring the book more worthy of his attention. A dull glaze coated his eyes, the whites slightly bloodshot. He was drunk, but he hid it well.

"Two entire bottles?" They were lying on the floor beside him, so thoroughly emptied that not a drop had spilled on the marble floor.

“Now I’m not allowed to drink?” He sneered. “Get off my back, Kingsdaughter.”

“I never said that.” My voice creeped up to a higher pitch.

“You’ve said enough, regardless.”

“Cohrven—”

“Cohrven!” He imitated me in a shrill voice. “You’re the Nightheart. You’re so horrible. Who gave you the right to exist?” His voice dropped to its normal, deep timbre. “Believe me, I know how you feel.”

“No, you don’t!” I realized I was yelling and took a calming breath. “I’m here to apologize.” He had the decency to look surprised. “This morning, what I said... I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me. Ever.” He snapped his book shut and placed the wine glass on the floor beside him. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Why don’t you believe you deserve any kindness?”

He slumped back into the chair, sighing. “I wish you would just hate me. You should.” He gripped the armrests, knuckles turning white. “You should detest me more than anyone in this world.”

“Why?”

“I was dead.” He stood and walked to me with slow, careful steps. “I was *dead*,” he repeated, a wrinkle forming between his brows. “My life was over. I wasn’t going to fight anymore. Then I heard your voice. Then I saw *you*.”

Stopping right in front of me, he braced a hand against the wall, just over my shoulder, to keep himself from falling, his dark eyes bright and intoxicated. “I didn’t think you were real—you were so beautiful, so strong, so determined.”

My lungs stopped working. He exhaled and the alcohol on his breath was all I could smell, could taste on my tongue. I didn’t pull away when he reached out his hand and grasped a long strand of my hair, twirling it gently around his fingers.

“I realized I wasn’t in the afterlife when you tried to pull me

up and the excruciating pain returned. When all I wanted to do was fall to the floor and let it end, you pushed me to survive. You fought for me, and your courage made me fight for myself.” He let go of my hair. “And all I have given you in thanks is my cruelty.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “You’ve saved me too. That means something.”

“Does it?” His gaze dropped to my lips as he leaned forward ever so slightly. My heart started pounding hard, but I didn’t back away. I didn’t want to.

Before I could say anything more, he pushed off the wall and away from me, the backs of his knees hitting a side table and sending it clattering back into the settee. To keep himself standing, he gripped the edge of the table.

He tilted his head to the ceiling, hiding his expression from me. A long moment passed as he collected himself, as his shallow, heaving breaths calmed.

“I need you to understand something about me,” he said, any trace of drunkenness gone as he trained his piercing eyes on me. “I need you to understand that my wings aren’t only for my enjoyment, or my freedom, or my means of commanding an army.

“When the Sunkiller tore the sun from the sky and saved our courts, Kaltianen gifted him wings darker than the blackest night—wings that marked him as her chosen. Since then, each of the Sunkiller’s ancestors have been born with the same black wings—a symbol of our divinity.” He flapped his wings sluggishly. “My wings are my connection to Kaltianen, and also a reminder of my responsibility to the Liral Court. I know I am not popular among my subjects; I know I am reviled by most. But when my father dies, I will succeed him as king, as intended by Kaltianen. She has not removed her favour, and so I will respect her intention that my family continue to rule Liral.”

His rigid stance softened as his shoulders slumped. “The Wither is not a choice. I don’t just *want* my wings to be healed—I *need* them to be healed in order to rule the Liral Court like

my father expects, or else he might pass me over for Val. She would be an excellent ruler, but she doesn't want the responsibility, and she would never forgive me for letting my father force the crown on her. To prevent that, to heal my wings, I will do *whatever* it takes."

There was a threat in his dark tone, whether he meant for it to be there or not.

He had said he wanted me to understand. How could I not? Whether or not his magic was derived from a god, he was only doing his duty. I would do anything for Erelie. Cohrven would do anything for Val. He *wanted* to fly again, but he *needed* his wings to carry out his responsibilities in order to protect Val—and that drove his desire to heal his wings more than anything else could.

I made my decision. "Let me help you find the Wither."

"I'm not asking for your help."

"I know."

His perpetual frown softened as his lips parted almost imperceptibly. His eyes widened, the inner corners of his brows lifting to a slight furrow. And what lay within his dark eyes was not his usual condescension, or judgment, or disinterest. It was vulnerability.

He looked at me like I was his saviour.

The next heartbeat, he resumed his stoic expression. "You should get some sleep then. Take the bed. I'll stay out here," he said abruptly. "I'm going to go back to what I was doing."

The sun had begun to dip beneath the horizon, only scattered, orange orbs of fire remaining in Hjairn's silhouette below.

"Are you going to be drinking all night?"

"No," he sighed. "I shouldn't even be—"

"Shouldn't even be drinking now?" I finished for him.

He shrugged, then staggered back to the chair he sat on earlier. "Go rest, Kingsdaughter. We're leaving before first



light.”

“Fine. Just...” The rest of the words stuck in my throat. *Know that I think you’re more than the Nightheart.* That’s what I had been about to say. But that was a bad idea. “Just get some sleep too.”

“I will.” He pretended to be so engrossed in his book, he wasn’t even aware that I lingered in the doorway, staring for far longer that I should have. Stiff shoulders and pursed lips told me that he was on edge, even when the alcohol should have drained the tension from him.

It was because of me that he had been drinking. A lump formed in my throat as I watched him turn the pages of his book. His large hands were so careful, his long fingers so delicate. Against my skin, they would be firm, but just as gentle.

He would restrain his vicious power for me. He already had.

Imagining it caused fire to smoulder in my veins, a dull warmth spreading from the pit of my stomach to my fingertips.

For me, his snarling mouth would soften into a smile. For me, his harsh commands would turn into pleading whispers.

For me, he would cage the beast clawing through the bones of his chest. For me, he would unleash it.

*All I had to do was ask.*

He turned another page, and I escaped before I was too far gone.

In Cohrven’s room, I took his direction and flopped onto his bed, rolling into the middle and crawling under his blankets. The mattress, stuffed with feathers, was more luxurious than mine had been, and his black sheets were spun of the softest, smoothest fabric my hands had ever touched.

I had seen his large frame sprawled out across the bed in the morning light, sheets tangled in his legs, sleeping trousers riding up to his knees, his dark, dishevelled hair dusted across his face and damp with sweat. I had heard him tossing and turning at night, either trying to find sleep or being tormented

in his nightmares. Not once had I asked him about it.

Horrors haunted him in the dark, and he wouldn't tell me what they were even if I wanted him to. Those burdens were his to carry alone. Maybe he even thought he deserved them.

When he killed his brother, Cohrven had been *scared*. That's what Val said, and I believed her. And if Cohrven didn't want to be like his older brother, then why? Ehren had been greedy enough to seek out the Wither and risk his life to become powerful. That was all I knew—all I would know—until I mustered up the courage to ask Cohrven.

I blanched at that inevitability. There wasn't any other way. Val couldn't speak about it, Rian wouldn't say anything, and there was no one else I could go to, nothing I could consult.

I doubted that Ehren would be mentioned in any of the genealogy texts in the library. Pages on which his name was penned had probably been torn out years ago, emptied like the walls of his mausoleum.

Even after my father's descent into madness, his legacy hadn't been destroyed. Had the obliteration of Ehren's existence been carried out because of Ehren himself, or had it been carried out to protect Cohrven?

I hoped I could find the bravery to ask the one fae who would tell me the truth.

# Twenty-seven

AS WE STRODE through the halls of Sky's End in the early morning, shrouded by one of my illusions, Cohrven took a wrong turn. Instead of heading out the back doors, to the stables, he turned right, down a wide hallway lit with blood-red torches, their flickering fae-light swirling up into open air before melting into the darkness.

I followed his imposing form diligently, almost losing him in the shadows. His black, woolen cloak swayed at the heels of his leather boots, covering his infamous wings and hiding his armour crafted from black leather and darkened steel plates—custom-made and ornate enough to attract attention when we were trying to avoid being recognized. The basic, nondescript armour worn by the Liral scouts hadn't been substantial enough to meet Cohrven's standards. Not that he could have disguised himself even in plain armour. His stature drew enough curious eyes as it was.

My gifted armour was similar, but crafted only from lightweight leather. It had been stained a deep forest green and carved ivy leaves bordered the breastplate and greaves, the obvious finery also hidden beneath my black cloak. When I woke up to find it displayed on a standing rack in front of Cohrven's bed, I had wondered how it had been made in such a short period of time. It was only when I had strapped on each fitted piece that I realized it hadn't—Cohrven had probably commissioned its creation when we first arrived at Sky's End.

I didn't let myself dwell on why.

"Where are you going?" I asked, taking to the air as I struggled to keep up with his hurried pace.

"To pray to Kaltianen, goddess of war and perseverance, keeper of the dead, ruler of Helveda." His gaze hardened as he spoke with conviction.

"In Sorcen, Kaltianen is the goddess of fortune and tricksters," I supplied, repeating my uncle's teachings. "She

rules nothing but chance, and bends to Aurricc's will.”

In truth, Kaltianen was barely mentioned in any histories of the Sorcen Court, whether by text or song. She was only ever mentioned in the retellings of King Ely's Tragedy.

“She has been so belittled by your ancestors.” Cohrven scoffed as he shook his head in disgust. “Tell me what you know of her, then.”

“An age ago, King Ely, the first Firerose, and Queen Catandre, the first Sundaughter, were given rule over the Sorcen Court by Aurricc. He had created the fae of the Sorcen Court, giving them life, and Ely and Catandre were his most devout worshippers. Not long after, the peace over which they governed was threatened by the Liral Court, compelled by Kaltianen, and for no reason other than to rebel against Aurricc.

“The Sunkiller used his magic to drag the sun from the sky, and earned his name by plunging the world into eternal darkness. Queen Catandre prayed to Aurricc for daylight, and she thought it was Aurricc who answered her—but it was Kaltianen, disguised as Aurricc. Kaltianen told Catandre that to create a new sun, Catandre must sacrifice herself, and so Catandre let Kaltianen rip her heart from her chest to place in the sky. Catandre died to save the world, and the sky was whole again.

“In his grief, Ely begged Aurricc to be reunited with Catandre. Aurricc heard his plea, then realized that Queen Catandre had been fooled by Kaltianen. As a merciful deity, he restored Catandre's heart, bringing her back to life and replacing the sun with half of his own heart. But that half only provided the light of day to Sorcen, and so Liral was left to survive in the dimmest of lights, cursed by its worship of Kaltianen.”

Cohrven snorted a laugh. “How ridiculous.”

Even though I didn't believe the story, my cheeks heated in embarrassment. “I'm only telling you what I heard.”

“It's wrong. All of it.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Aurricc was planning to destroy the Liral Court to weaken Kaltianen, and attempted to do so by using Ely and Catandre’s devotion to him. He instructed them in their every maneuver. Since it appeared to be a war brewing amongst fae, Kaltianen did not suspect Aurricc’s involvement, and so did not leave Helveda to intervene.

“Aurricc used Catandre as a conduit for his power—through her, he cursed the Liral Court to never again feel the sun. And so, Liral was cast into a never-ending darkness. Liralans prayed to Kaltianen, then known to all as the goddess of war. She heard their pleas, and beseeched the Sunkiller to kill the sun. He dragged it from the sky, leaving the Sorcen Court to share Liral’s eternal darkness. Aurricc and Kaltianen encountered each other above Liral and fought savagely, drops of their blood cratering Liral’s landscape. The Sunkiller, ever loyal to Kaltianen, helped her gain victory by using his magic to throw Aurricc off-balance.

“Kaltianen took advantage of the hole in Aurricc’s defenses and ripped Aurricc’s heart from his chest, killing him. She placed it in the sky as a new sun. But, though Aurricc’s curse was weakened by his death, it remained upheld. Liral became the court where the sun never rises and always sets. Kaltianen, having done all that she could to help her chosen, instilled the Sunkiller as the ruler of the Liral Court and returned to Helveda, her descent lifting the spires on which Hjairn is located.”

“There’s no way of knowing if that’s true.” Cohrven had a strong belief in Kaltianen, with little but the impossible blackness of his wings to provide evidence. “If Aurricc is dead, then who speaks to my uncle?”

“His ideas could easily be his own, and the declaration of Aurricc’s communication his excuse. I’ve read the Sunkiller’s journals. Queen Catandre and King Ely were planning on conquering all of existence and eradicating Liral, their thoughts heavily manipulated by Aurricc and only purified by Kaltianen. The truce was signed following Aurricc’s demise and there has been very little conflict between our courts since.

Kaltianen is not a goddess of luck that favours gamblers who pray to her, she is a being of wrath and tenacity.”

He spoke of Kaltianen with reverence. I was surprised when a knot of jealousy formed in my gut. Before I could untangle it, we reached the door to the temple. It was set in an elaborate archway, the aged, dark wood carved with symbols I didn't recognize.

Cohrven cracked the door open and blood-red light shone out. When he opened the door wider, I was startled to see his mother prostrated on the floor, her black hair loose and splayed out across the ground, covering her face. Oblivious to our presence, she remained still and silent as we snuck into the temple, her forehead pressed to the cold floor.

A flame the colour of fresh blood flickered from a square bier in the centre of the room, casting the walls in a sinister glow. The entire room was a box of black marble, holding nothing but the flame.

“She'll be gone soon,” Cohrven said, diverting my attention from Aehla. He had raised the hood of his cloak, shielding his face from my view.

“What does she pray for?”

“Forgiveness.”

“Why?”

“Someday, when you ask her, she'll tell you.” I couldn't imagine ever asking Aehla something so personal, but I didn't bother to refute him.

We waited for a few moments, then just as Cohrven said, his mother rose. She faced us, and instead of the grief I had been expecting, unfathomable rage contorted her features. I recoiled, thinking that she could see me, but she swept past without a glance.

Cohrven didn't say anything. I didn't need to ask. I had seen him in the menace of his mother.

His hair was hers. His eyes were hers. His anger might have been hers, too.

They were more alike than I had thought.

Taking a deep breath, Cohrven walked to the centre of the room, exactly where his mother had been, and knelt in the same position she had. No words left his lips, and we both descended into a deep silence. I feared breathing too loud and breaking the eerie calm flooding the room.

When Cohrven rose, he lowered his hood and stared at the bier, his back to me. “Come.” He gestured for me to stand beside him.

With some apprehension, I walked forward, hypnotized by the chaotic flickering of the flame. I watched as Cohrven took his dagger and cut the tip of his finger. He held it in the flame until a drop of blood fell and sizzled. Then he took my hand, and, before I could protest, pricked my finger and plunged it into the red fire. I cried out at the unexpected pain.

My flesh felt like it was peeling. The muscle beneath burning until white bone gleamed. The white blackening and decaying to ash.

“Let go!” I screamed. He squeezed the skin around the cut he had made, and ignored my struggle until my blood fell into the bier, joining his. His grip loosened and I yanked my hand away with a scowl.

“How dare you,” I gritted out, unafraid of showing my fury. I brought my finger up, only to see that he had already healed the cut, leaving my skin smooth and unblemished.

“Kaltianen needs blood to know us,” Cohrven explained, cleaning the bloody dagger on his cloak.

“You should have asked me first.”

“And if you had refused, I would have done it anyway.”

“Why?”

“I’m not taking any chances with your survival. Prayers are the least I can do.”

“I’ve never worshipped Kaltianen in my entire life. She doesn’t care about me, and she won’t now.”

“I have worshipped her, and so, *she will*.” There was only certainty in his guttural voice, as if he would crawl to Helveda and snap Kaltianen’s neck if she *didn’t* heed his prayers.

He raised his hood again and studied me through his lashes. Cloaked in blood-red light and shadows, he looked like he could be a god himself—one of hostility and retribution. A deity fae would only pray to in fear.

“Next time, ask me.” I glowered at him, the ghost of his cut stinging my finger.

Apprehension curled in my stomach. If Cohrven was praying to a goddess, I should have been more afraid than I was. I wouldn’t believe the Wither existed until I laid eyes on it.

“I won’t do it again,” he acquiesced, beckoning me to follow him back through the temple door. A flash of movement caught my eye as we entered the hallway, but whatever it was stayed out of sight in the shadows. Probably Silfvi, owing to the slightest upturn of Cohrven’s lips.

At the stables, Cohrven saddled the horses, filled the saddlebags with our provisions, and led the two animals out of their stalls while I flew high into the sky, affording myself a last glimpse of Hjairn. The black, glossy spires jutting from the ground did look like they had emerged from Helveda, Kaltianen’s kingdom welcoming her home as she descended once again.

We mounted our horses and set off through Hjairn. Fae were awake, but the streets were sparse and no one could see through my illusion. Once we were outside the wall, the sun began to rise, smudging the black sky with orange. Cohrven was deathly quiet, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

He never turned to check on me as I followed him, but his neck twitched every so often, as if he was fighting the unconscious urge to look back.

Keeping me alive was important to him, he had admitted, important enough that he would risk my ire. I quelled the fluttering in my stomach, choosing to focus on the road ahead.



Silence followed the rest of the day. I trailed Cohrven across wide farmer's fields, planted across shallow valleys stretching to the horizon, almost like craters with edges that had been softened by the passing of time.

Though its dimness could be stifling, Liral was as breathtaking as Sorcen, the ancient trees short and gnarled, but full of chirping birds, the fields full of wildflowers that thrived in low light, their petals a variety of muted colours, the cobblestone paths clean and well-maintained. The occasional gust of warm wind sent my hair floating about my head like golden smoke.

One time, when I was spitting strands out of my mouth, I swept my hair back from my face and caught Cohrven staring, looking back at me for the first time. He whipped his head forward so hard I thought he would wrench his neck.

When I thought back to the fear that used to overwhelm me when I imagined this blighted court, I felt silly. If there were any court I was afraid of setting foot in now, it was Sorcen. I no longer had a home there, and even if I were to go back, it wouldn't feel right. Flying through the palace halls and pretending that everything was the same would be impossible.

In the Liral Court, I was free. All of my instincts were pulling me back to Hjairn, to Val, to Rian... to Cohrven. When I imagined my future, I was in Sky's End, not some nameless Liral town where I could be forgotten.

Truly, my mind was already made up. Even if Cohrven was rude and annoying most of the time, his sister wasn't. And even if Cohrven and I fought forever, he would make sure I was given all that I could ever want.

And, more than anything, I wanted to live a life I could be proud of. I wanted to prove to my uncle that I could be more than he had ever dreamed. If I was running from him for the rest of my existence, I would accomplish nothing.

"Allina." Cohrven finally looked back at me again.

"Yes?"

"If anything happens to me, at any time, I want you to leave."

Fly back to Sky End's and find Val. She'll keep you safe, no matter what."

"I don't—"

"Promise me."

"I won't."

With a grunt of frustration, he let it go.

# Twenty-eight

AS THE SUN was falling below the horizon, we reached the decrepit inn where we planned to stay for the night. The Long-Tailed Mare was a drafty, rotting building without a front door, its roof missing patches of thatching and the yard slippery with mud.

Cohrven smacked enough coin for two separate rooms down on the counter in front of an innkeeper with grey wings that matched the few hairs remaining on his head, who looked between the two of us with undisguised wariness. Our faces were hidden beneath our hoods, shrouded in shadow.

Noticing his apprehension, Cohrven slid two gold coins across the counter. After the innkeeper wisely decided to accept our business, Cohrven flipped me a few coppers and left me behind once I was safely locked inside my room.

Not long after, I dipped my spoon into a bowl of rabbit stew and pushed the last chunk of carrot around. To my surprise, the food had been good—the stew seasoned with salt and garlic, the bread freshly baked, and the water clean. One copper sitting on the table beside my mug of pear cider was all I had left after ordering all I could eat. The coin glinted as firelight flickered from the stone fireplace that sat a few long paces from the end of my bed.

A small table flanked by two chairs were placed in front of the fireplace, with my bed against the opposite wall. Old tapestries decorated the walls, too faded for me to make out their details or original colours. Blue linen curtains covered the only small window in the space, the fabric so thin that moonlight shone through, falling across the wide planks of the wooden floor.

When I closed my eyes, I could pretend that I was in my room in in the Sun Palace, sitting in front of the fire and reading, wrapped up in a blanket to fend off the chill of a rainy day. My peace only ever lasted until Erelie found me and dragged me outside to fly through the falling water. Up in the

sky, everything was so obscured it seemed like we were the only two beings in existence.

I opened my eyes and banished the vision of the past, unable to afford to truly forget where I was. The light was dim, the air damp, but it was loneliness that began to weigh me down. In a strange room, in a strange inn, with strangers surrounding me, I missed Cohrven's familiar form, the deep timbre of his voice.

I changed into an oversized tunic before crawling into bed and swaddling myself in the quilted blanket, seeking comfort from its warmth. With the fire going, the small room was pleasant enough that I could ignore the scratchiness of my blanket and the faint musty scent in the air. Below me, I could hear stomping and singing and laughter.

For a long while I listened, unable to fall asleep. I wanted to join in the dancing, but I knew I couldn't. No one could know that I was in Liral until I returned with Cohrven, so I couldn't show my face to anyone.

Our story would start with the truth—that I helped him escape. After that, it would all be a lie. My uncle started hunting us, so once we passed through the Crossover, we split up. After returning home, Cohrven had left so that he could find me and escort me to the castle, to ensure my safety as an honoured guest of the royal family.

A light knock interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in," I said, not moving from the bed. Cohrven was the only fae who could be knocking, and he could let himself in. I watched as the deadbolt slid free on its own, confirming my suspicion.

I shuffled out from underneath my blankets and sat at the end of the bed, dropping my feet to the floor as Cohrven entered. The door shut and locked by itself. He removed his hood and nodded in greeting, settling himself onto one of the chairs in front of the fireplace after turning it to face me.

"What is it?" I asked. Though Cohrven didn't move with any urgency, he had to have some important reason to come visit.

“Even I am not immune to solitude,” he sighed. A simple explanation that I understood entirely. He leaned back into the chair and slid his long legs forward, lounging, and looking far too at ease with one elbow propped up on an armrest, his knuckles holding up his tilted head. “Besides, your room is far quieter.” He tapped his foot against the floor to the beat of the music below, making his point.

We fell into silence, the crackling of the flames in the fireplace mingling with the muted music, before he shifted in his chair, leaning forward, his hands clasped together, elbows resting on his thighs.

“Do you know anything about your father?” he asked.

The question took me aback, and, though I wished I knew everything about my father, there was no reason for me to lie. “No one spoke of my parents except for Osreth.”

Cohrven sighed, and rubbed his forehead before taking a deep breath. “Your father was powerful beyond measure. More powerful than I am, though I will only admit that to you. He could connect two locations in time and space. The Sun Palace’s waterfall was only one result of that power.”

“He only ever used his magic once, though, for the waterfall.” He had told me it was our secret, never to be shared with anyone else.

But in Cohrven’s face, I saw the truth.

No, he had accomplished other feats with his magic. And Cohrven knew so much more than I did.

“I met your parents.” Cohrven’s eyes met the floor almost ashamedly, as if admitting that he should have mentioned it to me sooner.

I couldn’t disguise my shock. “When? How?”

“I was very young when they visited the Liral Court. It was a year or two before your father... succumbed to madness. I remember your mother’s ocean-blue hair, how it flowed through the air as if suspended in water, rippling with each gust of wind. She played with Val, just a baby then, mesmerizing her with floating droplets of water. And I

remember your father, with his golden hair and piercing green eyes—the same as yours. He loved to laugh, and loved to make others laugh in turn. They were the first fae I had ever seen that were equals to my own parents, in both mannerisms and power.”

Tears gathered in my eyes as he recalled what I could not. I had fleeting glimpses, dulled feelings, hums of their voices, lifeless portraits relegated to forgotten storage rooms. I couldn't remember my mother's fluid hair or my father's bright eyes beyond what I had created in my imagination, and that could never be real.

“Your father wanted to open the Crossover between the Sorcen and Liral Courts, to extend the truce signed so long ago. His wish was to become friends and trade between our courts. My father was reserved in response, but desperate to start trading for fresh produce.”

Something must have gone wrong, because Sorcen had never traded Liral for anything. The fae of Sorcen, as I grew up with them, would have reviled the mere suggestion.

“Your father, however, was overly enthusiastic. Unbeknownst to my father, he had already connected our courts at many strategic trade routes, and some less obvious locations—like the one we crossed through to enter Liral—as we discovered later. When he revealed this, my father was furious that he had connected our realms without his consent and refused the agreement, banishing your parents from Liral.”

“I've never heard anything about this before.” Shouldn't there have been at least whispers in the halls of the Sun Palace? Rumours that my parents had visited before their deaths? Hints that the Liral Court wasn't as bloodthirsty as all of Sorcen had believed it to be?

“Osreth showed no interest in a reconciliation after he was crowned, and my father's pride had been wounded too much for him to initiate a conversation regarding trade with your ambassadors. Now, we know that Osreth was biding his time, thinking that he alone knew the locations of your father's connections. He was likely planning to use them when

attacking Liral after we retaliated in response to my capture. He doesn't know we've figured out where every single connection lies, and that he would be the one *surprised*."

Cohrven had been right that a war with Liral would have meant a massacre to Sorcen. Osreth had thought he would catch Liral off-guard with his kidnapping of Cohrven and blatant instigation of war, but Heron had been rabidly waiting as well. Desperately hoping that Osreth would give him an excuse to conquer Sorcen, just like Cohrven had said when he convinced me to help him return to Liral.

"You are keeping your promise," I whispered.

"Of course." His voice was rougher, deeper as he captured my stare, took hold of it with his serious, dark eyes. My heart beat faster in my chest, until I could feel it battering my ribs. He cleared his throat and looked to the window, his black hair clinging to the strong column of his throat, his sharp jaw clenched.

I couldn't help but admire him in the firelight, his face cast in shadows, his eyes glowing with the flickering flames. He was a breathtaking vessel of vicious power, his innate capacity for destruction only contained by his unwavering discipline.

He was my compulsion. Everything I wanted. Everything I could never admit to wanting.

All I could think of was how close he was. If I took one step, I could be touching him. If I asked him to, he could be crawling over me.

Everything could be hidden in the dark of night. Tomorrow, afterwards, under the sun, I could regain my senses and pretend that nothing ever happened. Blazing desire swirled beneath my skin, pulling me even further from reason.

I just had to ask. I just had to say his name. It would be so *easy*.

In a drafty inn, no one knew who we were. No one would care to glance. No one would care to listen. No one would remember.

A grimace flashed across his face before he rose from his

chair swiftly, knocking it over with a loud, startling thump. “Sorry,” he murmured, righting it before he charged towards the door. He clamped his hand around the handle then stopped abruptly, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath before leaning his forehead against the wood. His chest rose and fell, his face hidden behind his hair.

The metal of the handle squealed, crumpling as he tightened his hold. He brought his other hand to the door, digging his fingers into the wood as his bicep flexed, as if he was fighting to keep himself in place.

“I can feel you,” he breathed, a low rumble that crawled up my spine. Whatever decision he was making had been made as he removed himself from the door and faced me again. His expression darkened, his eyes piercing mine before travelling to my chest. “Every beat of your heart.” His pupils dilated, enveloping his brown irises as his gaze traced my neck. “I can feel the blood rushing through your veins, the air expanding your lungs as your breaths quicken.

“And I know what it means.” Arrogance laced his words, feral hunger plain in his expanded pupils, the slightest baring of his teeth.

“What does it mean?”

Burning eyes met mine. “It means I could *stay*.”

A furious desire burst to life beneath my skin. He leaned over me, his knuckles pressing deep into the mattress, his breaths uneven and his lips warm against the pointed tip of my ear. “Tell me I’m wrong,” he begged.

“I can’t,” I whispered, admitting it to myself as much as him.

*I wanted him.*

*And he could feel it.*

His lips skimmed my temple, my jaw, my neck as he leaned into me, his hard chest meeting mine as I arched into him, my hands fisted in the front of his shirt, pulling him closer. His weight pushed me down into the mattress as he gripped my thighs just below my hips, his hands spread wide, fingers



digging into my skin.

“I don’t know how to be gentle,” he murmured.

“You’d be gentle for me.” I was losing myself in the heat of his body, the overwhelming hunger inside me growing stronger with each heartbeat.

He stilled, his breath catching, but instead of lifting his mouth to mine, he pulled away, his confident expression collapsing to dismay as he stepped back, until his face was a hidden shadow framed by the firelight.

“You don’t have to pretend, Kingsdaughter,” he said flatly. “I won’t hurt you.”

I couldn’t bring myself to speak as confusion wracked my thoughts. The warmth in the pit of my stomach chilled as Cohrven’s wings flared, showing his mounting agitation.

“But why would you be honest?” he asked, taking advantage of my silence. “You hate me.”

I could have laughed in disbelief. After everything we’ve been through, he was still clinging to my past hatred, using it as a weapon...or a shield.

“You hate yourself, Nightheart.” I stood, meeting his challenge. “Don’t mistake that hatred for mine.”

He struggled to respond, but I didn’t wait for his excuses. My burning had turned to rage, and I was ready to unleash my fury.

“Every step I take, every time I breathe, I make a choice to stay here, with *you*.” My voice grew louder with each word. Dark eyes finally met mine, guarded and unreadable. “You’re wrong when you say that I hate you. Everything I do proves otherwise.”

“I didn’t—”

“You said you would *change*.” A humourless laugh cracked out of my mouth. “I don’t see any change. I see the Nightheart being who he always was, who he always will be.”

“And who is that?” he rumbled as the room trembled with

his restrained power, the tapestries on the walls levitating, their very threads humming.

“Someone so full of self-loathing that he’s only comfortable believing everyone else hates him too.”

Silence fell. Only Cohrven’s heavy breaths filled the room, growing more savage with each exhale. He had nothing to say to me.

All of his words the other day had been meaningless. He would make nothing up to me, because he didn’t care about me. He never had. He never would.

If Cohrven wanted me to hate him, I would oblige.

“Get out,” I ordered, his prolonged silence suffocating as the heat from the fireplace became too much. I ground my teeth. “I wish you could just be *honest* with me.”

“*I’m not honest?*” Cohrven barked a laugh, void of amusement and brimming with mockery. His eyes gleamed as he bared his teeth. “No, Kingsdaughter, you’re the one that hasn’t been honest. I’ve let you pretend that you’ve been helping *me*, but I’ve done you the real favour.”

“What do you mean?” A slight quiver shook my question, as I hoped he wasn’t going to say it, wasn’t going to finally use the awful truth that had remained between us since our conversation at Noranin’s, when he asked me what I was planning to do after saving him. I had hoped he didn’t know.

*After that, I’m travelling to the human territories.*

“We both know you could never run away to the human territories.” He gripped the back of one of the chairs in front of him with both hands, his knuckles tightening and the wood creaking with the pressure. “Humans died out an age ago. The human territories are rotten. There is no sun. There is no fresh water. There is no air to breathe. An impassable shroud of decay has smothered the continent for thousands of years.”

Tears gathered in my eyes, the pain of the truth twisting my stomach, piercing my heart. He knew about the human territories. He *knew*. And he had let me pretend for so long before crushing what little remained of my dignity.

“You were sentenced to a life of being preyed upon, never remaining in one place for long, never settling down, avoiding *every fucking tree* in Sorcen.” I couldn’t look into his pitying eyes any longer, and swung my hair over my face, struggling to keep him from noticing my collapsed expression, my utter despair.

“I gave you a new beginning—a life in Liral,” he continued. The back of the chair splintered under his grip, the loud crack echoing through the room. “As repayment for you saving my life, I saved *yours*. You chose to help me for the chance to stop your uncle’s war, I don’t doubt that, but you also chose to help me because I would free you. So don’t pretend that you’re so selfless, *Kingsdaughter*.”

He was right. I had nowhere to go, no one to turn to after I escaped my uncle. I had been deluding myself since the moment I decided to leave the Sun Palace, hoping that beyond all reason, the human territories were survivable again.

If they weren’t, I would have died trying to find out.

Liral was my only chance at beginning anew. Cohrven *had* saved my life, just like I had saved his.

Stark shame made nausea coil through my stomach. But I would never admit that to him.

“*Get out.*”

The second time, he listened, and left as quietly as he had come, not even pausing to inspect the ruined door handle. I crawled back under my blanket, tears of anger burning my eyes and wetting my pillow.

I should have wanted to leave, to make him find the Wither on his own.

But his cause had effortlessly become mine. I would fight for Val. I would fight so that she could lead the life she wanted, not the one that would be thrust upon her. Cohrven could never frustrate me enough to make me turn away from her. If I couldn’t be by Erelie’s side, protecting her from Osreth, at least I could protect Val from being controlled by her father.

I tossed and turned the rest of the night, my blankets twisted about my legs. The mattress was hard against my back, and feathers stuck out of my soggy pillow, digging into my skin.

In the morning, with pronounced bags beneath my tired, puffy eyes, I pulled up the hood of my cloak and made my way outside, clenching my jaw in apprehension as I prepared to see Cohrven again.

Last night... I wanted to pretend it had never happened—that it was a nonsensical dream. But I couldn't remove the brand of his hands from my thighs, the warmth of his breath from my skin.

He was waiting with the saddled horses, his hood up as he faced away from me, leaning back against a hitching post. My face flushed red with discomfort at the very sight of him, nausea making me turn to my horse, to distract myself with anything that meant I could ignore him for longer.

A carrot muffin sat perched on my saddle. My breakfast. A gesture—of forgiveness, maybe. I didn't give him the satisfaction of eating it. Instead, I offered it to my horse, keeping my palm flat as it chomped on the unexpected treat.

I let myself glance at Cohrven, and took a stuttered step backwards at the severity of his expression. I was back in Noranin's living room, staring at the Nighthead as he truly was after waking, as everything screamed in me to *run*.

*Danger. Bloody knives. Nighthead.*

I couldn't back away from him fast enough—from those hard eyes, from those hands that could sever spines. Even if there was a reason, he had killed his brother—his *family*. If he decided to, he could kill me just as easily.

Cohrven was the Nighthead. I was a fool to overlook that again and again.

I had to remember all that Cohrven had done. What he was capable of. I had to keep it at the forefront of my mind. He could hurt me if I let my guard down.

I tried to convince myself to hate Cohrven again, like he wanted so badly, but conflict still raged inside me. What I had

seen in Hjairn had shown that Cohrven was the exact opposite of all that the Nightheart should be. He loved his family and his friends, and he was loved in turn. He would sacrifice himself before he let anyone he loved come to harm.

The flat emptiness in his eyes haunted me as he stared. For so long, Cohrven had been the Nightheart, instilling fear unwillingly and using it to his every advantage. I wondered if he even knew how to be anyone else.

He took one careful step forward.

I harnessed my magic and prepared to retaliate. But when his gaze shifted to the ground, I realized that he wasn't angry, or vengeful, or even irritated.

He was ashamed.

And for one, brief moment, *I* felt ashamed for thinking that he would attack me.

"I'm not something for the almighty Nightheart to toy with whenever it pleases him," I stated, making my opinion of his conduct last night clear.

"I-I..." He cut himself off and covered his face with a hand, breathing deeply through his nose. When he removed it, his eyes narrowed and his open mouth had formed a tight line. "I apologize. It will never happen again."

Anguish flared through me, even though it should have been what I wanted.

"It's time for us to leave, Nightheart," I said, pretending to be unaffected. A muscle in his jaw twitched at the name, but he nodded.

# Twenty-nine

WE RODE IN uncomfortable, deliberate silence for a few miles before Cohrven gasped in pain. He cursed, clutching his hand to his chest, and, without thinking, I kicked my heels into my horse's flanks and galloped the short distance to him.

“What is it?”

With a grimace, he held his bloodied palm out to me. I recoiled before seeing that it was a shallow cut. The wound stretched the length of his palm, bleeding profusely, but wasn't anything that he couldn't heal himself—or so I thought.

“I need you to heal me.” I stared in confusion. His words jumbled together until I was sure I had misheard him.

“What did you say?”

“You need to heal me.” He halted his horse and held up his hand, his blood dripping onto the grass.

“No.”

*He thrashed on the floor of the cave, blood spurting from the wounds carved into the wreck of his chest, blood weeping from his mouth, blood staining my skin crimson. I could see his white lips, his ashen skin. His dark eyes had glazed over, unfocused and so near death.*

My hands had almost killed him—*would have* killed him—if not for Noranin.

“No,” I repeated, shaking my head violently. “I can't. I won't.”

*I knelt in his blood. It was still warm. The ends of my hair dragged through the spreading pool.*

“I need you to,” he pleaded.

*But he was screaming. I pressed my hands into his chest. I couldn't stop the bleeding. There was too much red and he was going to die.*

“No.” I gulped down a breath. “I’ll kill you. Like last time.”

“Not if I talk you through it.”

“Do it yourself.” My hands shook. If I dared to try, all I would bring to Cohrven was more blood.

“I can’t afford to waste my magic.” His hand was still dripping and dripping. Trails of crimson oozed down his wrist.

“Oh, so *I* can?” The fire I had wanted to strengthen my voice with wasn’t there. Trying to heal Cohrven after saving him was one of my greatest failures, one that made my chest feel like it was about to cave in.

“I’m not fully healed,” he explained. “My magic’s still depleted. So yes, it’s better for you to do it.”

My wings drooped. “I can’t.”

“Of course you can.” I couldn’t even look at him. “You’re strong enough, Allina.”

My first instinct was to scoff. He had humiliated me just last night. He had no right to say I was strong.

*But wasn’t I?*

Already, I had defeated my uncle’s soldiers, and protected Cohrven while doing so. My illusions wouldn’t be so powerful without all of the years I had spent practicing in the forest. Healing was the same.

Healing him for a second time would be different. I would make it different.

“Tell me what to do.”

Cohrven’s lips twitched as he fought to keep a smile from his face. He held out his hand, palm facing upwards. “Place your hand on mine.” I hesitated to touch all that blood, but he nodded and urged me on. The hot, sticky sensation sent shivers of unease up my spine, but I firmly pressed my palm to his.

“Gather a trickle of magic to your palm—the absolute smallest amount you can without losing hold.” I willed my magic to flow to the exact middle of my palm, the tiny well

gathered just beneath my skin. “Ready?”

“Yes.” I took deep, calming breaths as magic pulsed through my body, cycling at an excited pace. With practiced control, I pushed the excess away so that I could focus on the well in my palm.

“Make it radiate to the surface of your skin. It should feel like a thick layer covering your palm.”

Sweat broke out on my forehead. Fine manoeuvres had never been something I practiced often. Whenever I used my magic, I cast it wide, blasting it towards my targets like an explosion, catching whomever or whatever I wanted to trap in my illusions.

With some effort, the magic clung to my palm like a piece of thin fabric. It was unstable, and I struggled to keep it in the same spot. Cohrven surveyed the trouble I was having clinically.

“Push it into my palm,” he ordered. “Don’t let any other magic flow through.”

I grit my teeth and let the magic leech into his skin gradually. A current of magic rushed to join the well in my palm, but I held it back. Behind the dam I had built, it battered against the wall and spread out, trying to find any leaks it could force itself through.

I didn’t let it, but my head pounded with the effort. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as the last of the magic in my palm seeped into Cohrven’s wound.

“Let go.” With relief, I did. He used his cloak to clean the blood from his hand, and when he held up his palm to me, even though a faint outline of the cut remained, it had stopped bleeding.

Despite my fear of hurting him again, I couldn’t help breaking into a smile.

“Thank you.” Cohrven grinned right back at me. “You’re a quick learner.”

“I wasn’t able to heal you completely.”



“No, but you were being cautious.”

I nodded in acquiescence, unable to look away from his palm. Using my magic, I had sewn his flesh back together—mostly. My chest swelled with pride. Next time it would be even easier.

Cohrven healed the remaining outline of the cut I had left, leaving his hand unmarred again. He prompted his horse to lope as a gust of wind rustled his cloak, revealing a flash of something metal tucked into his sword belt. Before I could take a closer look, the fabric had settled and he was too far away.

The path we followed grew narrower each mile, the bare, gnarled trees of a forest encroaching on the cobblestone. Even the stone itself grew less polished, retaining the roughly-hewn texture from when it had been first laid. Fewer travellers passed us by, and we caught up to none. Though still unknown to me, our destination was clearly remote.

Cohrven spent the entire day lost in thought, staring ahead but not really seeing anything. By the time the sun began to set, dark circles marred the skin underneath his eyes, and his hands were unusually pale. He looked ill enough that I kept pace so I could catch him if he tumbled off his horse.

The night passed in silence. As did the next five days.

Cohrven became more haggard with each sunrise, exhaustion sagging his shoulders and glazing his eyes, but he always said he felt fine. Every question I had was answered with one word, and sometimes he didn't bother to say anything at all, leaving me with a brief shake or nod of his head in response.

It was the first night we weren't sleeping in an inn, and I ached with worry. Making camp in the forest normally wouldn't have been a problem, but Cohrven was more of a silhouette than a living creature. If he was truly as ill as he appeared, the cold night air would only make his condition deteriorate.

We should have stayed at the last inn one more night, but it

was far too late to turn back. The sun was already drifting below the horizon, our horses were exhausted, and we were miles from the closest town.

“I’m too tired,” I lied. “I need to stop for the day.”

Cohrven nodded, and I led us into the forest. Once we were far enough from the path, I stopped us and began to clear debris.

Going through the motions, Cohrven tied up and unsaddled his horse. Without even removing his armour, he laid his pallet on the ground, covered himself with a blanket, and closed his eyes. I started a fire, keeping an eye on him the entire time as I hid us with an illusion.

His breaths frequently hitched in his sleep, rooting me in place until I could hear him exhale. He twitched at random intervals, his lips forming silent words. I shifted so that I only sat a couple of feet from his unconscious form, unsure of whether to wake him or to let him rest. I ate small mouthfuls of salted beef, stoking the fire as needed, uneasiness building inside me as I watched Cohrven shiver.

*What if I was the reason?* The thought struck me like a bolt of lightning.

I hadn’t harmed Cohrven when I healed him. That’s what he had said.

*But what if I had?*

His illness could be a lingering side effect, one that he couldn’t have predicted. One that he didn’t even know was possible.

*Again.* I could have been killing him again.

Moonlight filtered through the canopy of skeletal branches. I stared up at the sky smattered with stars, its fathomless black the same colour as Cohrven’s wings, and listened to the sound of him breathing.

# Thirty

*AH!*”

I rolled up onto my knees at Cohrven’s scream. His eyes were wide open, panicked and searching. He dug his fingers into the ground, scraping dirt, and screamed again. Within a heartbeat, I was leaning over him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, examining him for any physical wounds. His torn wings flared open, throwing his blanket off his back.

“They’re *burning*,” he cried, clenching his eyes shut. He screamed again, thrashing his wings, scratching his clawed fingers against the dirt. “Stop it. *Please*. I need it to stop.”

For a long moment, I froze. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t even know what I *could* do.

Magic flowed to my palm on instinct. I swallowed my fear and climbed onto Cohrven’s lower back to hold his body down.

“Stop moving.” He sobbed something my ears couldn’t catch, and tried to twist and throw me off. I didn’t let him, forcing his shoulders down and settling the rest of my weight on his back.

“It *burns*.” His wings smashed against my face as he fought me. “Make it stop.”

“I will.” Tears rolled down his cheeks, his nails ragged and bleeding as he writhed on the ground.

“Cohrven, stop moving!” I finally shouted. “Stop!”

His muscles quivered, but he listened to me. Wasting no time, I unstrapped his breastplate, threw it to the side, and cut his shirt open, exposing his back. I placed my palms against the feverish skin between his wings and willed my magic to trickle in steadily.

His muscles spasmed underneath my hands as he restrained himself from trying to buck me off.

“Focus on my hands. Not on the burning.”

“It’s like fire.”

“Is it getting better?”

“I don’t know.” His answer worried me, but I didn’t dare let any more magic through. To heal Cohrven properly, I couldn’t rush. Not when I still knew next to nothing about healing.

He screamed and arched his back, making me force him to the ground again.

“Stay still,” I ordered, trying not to let the panic I was feeling leach into my voice.

It was the exact same as before. My hands started shaking. I was going to kill Cohrven, and Noranin wasn’t here to save him. No one was.

“*Don’t die,*” I pleaded over and over, pressing my hands into his skin so hard my fingers ached. Cohrven was crying like a child. I wanted to cry with him.

His whimpers dissipated and he ceased fighting me, his entire body going limp. At first, I thought he had stopped breathing, but his back expanded and contracted in time with his soft exhales.

“Cohrven,” I whispered. “Are you alright?”

“It hurts less,” he said, so low I could barely discern the words. I let out a short, hysterical laugh of relief and stretched my cramped fingers. When they left his back, he groaned.

“Can you...” I had never heard so much uncertainty in his voice. “Can you keep touching me?”

My whole body went rigid.

“Just as you were,” he clarified, voice crumbling with exhaustion as he closed his eyes and rested his head on his forearm.

And I hesitated. Because five nights ago he had been leaning

over me, his lips burning a path across my skin, when he had decided I was only indulging him because of fear. But this time, I wouldn't let touching him mean anything.

I answered by running my fingertips along the ridge of his spine, from the nape of his neck to where it met the front of my thighs. He relaxed into my touch, inhaling and exhaling so evenly. Calm washed over us as I explored his skin.

I trailed my fingers across his powerful shoulders, and flattened my palms against the hard muscles of his back. I remembered watching him fight at Sky's End, how he had moved with lethal grace and unfaltering precision. He had trained so hard to hone his body into a weapon, even though daggers had been flowing through his blood since the day he was born.

With the magic he possessed, there seemed to be only one path for him—the one path he had been forced down.

Could he really be blamed for something so inevitable?

I almost scoffed at myself. Of course he could. His whole court blamed him. I blamed him.

I reached his wings and traced the veins that remained. My uncle's brand. Ragged membranes swayed against the backs of my hands.

Osreth wouldn't stop until we were both dead, until all that was left of Cohrven's wings were stumps attached to his corpse, until my head was rolling across the marble floor of his throne room.

And what for? Aurricc's favour? Power? A legacy?

I dropped my hands from Cohrven's wings to settle on his back again. Absentmindedly, I drew gentle patterns on his skin as my thoughts darkened.

*Nothing.* I was worth nothing to Osreth, Ryena, and maybe even Erelie.

Word of Cohrven's—*our*—massacre would have been spread widely across Sorcen. Osreth would leverage it against us as much as he possibly could. Only monsters could have

done it, he would say, only monsters could have killed and mutilated so many fae.

But the real monsters were the ones that took a prince from his family. The ones that kidnapped him, unprovoked. The ones that tortured him. The ones that tore his wings to pieces and revelled in his pain.

The biggest monster was the one who had given the order. He would kill an innocent fae in a show of strength. He would execute his brother's daughter to keep that illusion of strength in place. He would send his soldiers to hunt them until they were dead. He would blame his actions on the orders of a god who only he could hear.

Maybe I had been born to a family of monsters. My father had opened my mother's throat before stabbing himself in the heart. My uncle was only following his older brother's example. I was next in line—the heir to insanity. Being called the *Madkingsdaughter* didn't seem so unbelievable now.

I let my hands still, the heat from Cohrven's skin keeping them warm as midnight crept closer, bringing forth the chill of deep night. Rationality overcame me with a rush of cold wind that rustled the leaves.

I had gone too far. I didn't want Cohrven to think that I... I couldn't let him think anything, not after that night at the inn. Not after his stark rejection. Confusion scared me into moving.

As I stood, he grumbled in protest. I shushed him. "Do your wings still hurt?"

"Only a little." He folded them as he spoke.

After grabbing his eschewed blanket from the ground, I wiped it free of dirt and laid it on top of him.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"Don't." He looked to me with a questioning gaze. "It was me, wasn't it? When I healed your hand, I did something wrong."

"No." He sounded so surprised. "Of course you didn't."

I wished I could have believed him.

“Look at me, Allina.” His dark eyes were clear, his expression tender. “Noranin did the best she could to heal my wounds, but my body experienced very serious trauma.”

“Because of *my* uncle.”

“*You* are not your uncle.” He paused, letting the words sink in. “Healing fatal wounds takes repetition and time. I haven’t had enough of either. The stress of near-constant travelling and fighting was bound to catch up to me. I knew it would happen sometime soon. I just hoped that I would be strong enough to ignore the effects.”

“It wasn’t me, then?”

“It wasn’t you.” I could have crumpled in relief. “The control you have over your magic is exceptional.”

“It wasn’t me.” I hardly believed it. I hadn’t hurt him. I had done the exact opposite—eased his pain, helped him get through the worst of his recovery.

“You’re going to be a wonderful healer.”

The sincerity in his words made me think so too. I slipped under my own blanket, and looked up at the stars. “Will you teach me?” I wanted to learn as much as I could, as fast as I could.

“I will.”

“Who taught you?”

“My grandfather, before he died. Then my father taught me the rest.” A frown appeared on his face as he lost himself in thought for a few moments. “For my father, healing was all about efficiency, practicality. For my grandfather, it was a calling. He was the one that made me love it.”

“You love healing?”

“I find balance in knowing that I can use my magic to do more than harm.”

I couldn’t find a response, and we lapsed into silence. I still felt the softness of his skin against my fingers, the heat of him against my palms.

Piece by piece, my resolve was cracking. Cohrven was igniting something in me, something so raw I could barely control it. I was terrified, but there was a part of me that wanted to accept everything I was feeling. And that terrified me the most.



# Thirty-one

I COULDN'T TAKE my eyes from Cohrven's hands as he saddled his horse. His nails were ragged, ground down by digging his fingers into the dirt. Crusted blood obscured the cuts on the pads of his fingertips. He never gave any indication that he was in pain, but I knew he had to be.

Still, I hesitated. Healing him... I didn't finish the thought. I walked over to him and stroked his horse's mane, stalling while I worked up courage. He stopped what he was doing, waiting for me to say whatever was on my mind.

"Give me your hands." I held out mine. Tentatively, he placed both of his hands flat on my palms.

The magic came so easy and unencumbered that I almost let it overflow. Cutting it off was like building a wall in the midst of a relentless current, but I managed to succeed and let all I needed trickle through. I concentrated magic in both of my hands and went through the ritual of letting it seep into Cohrven's skin.

"That's enough," he said, after the torn skin was mended back together. I looked from his hands to his face, to see that he had been staring at me the whole time. His dark eyes were unreadable, his lips slightly parted. When his thumbs stroked the insides of my wrists, I became all too aware of how tiny my hands felt in his.

"I need to stretch my wings," I said, breaking eye contact and pulling away. My legs shook, so I took to the air, rising above the trees. Moisture clung to my skin as I shot through the clouds, going higher and higher.

Once the forest was a smudged cluster of green, I hovered in one spot. When I closed my eyes, I was able to focus on slowing each breath until my heart wasn't rattling my chest.

The Nightheart. Cohrven. They were one and the same. There couldn't be one without the other.

I remembered him grinning at me as he saddled Solheim, his brown eyes full of warmth. I felt his hand on my knee, his thumb brushing against it to reassure me that he was there, that he wanted to listen. That he would try to understand, for me.

My heart skipped a beat, then starting pounding harder. I was scared of what I felt for Cohrven—what it could become. At the inn, I had never been so terrified of myself. Last night, I had almost made the same mistake.

My purpose was to help Cohrven heal his wings, and I couldn't let myself be distracted by my ridiculous feelings. I had to focus on the Wither, and only the Wither. Back on the ground, Cohrven and I would both pretend that nothing ever happened. It would be easier that way.

With renewed determination, I folded my wings against my back and dropped. The exhilarating rush cleared my mind, and when I pulled up long before hitting the trees, I was smiling.

Cohrven had sensed I needed some time to myself, and had already tied my horse's lead to his saddle. From the sky, I followed him, looking to the horizon. We covered far less ground than we had hoped, the horses struggling through the dense undergrowth.

Later, when night had descended, we sat in front of the fire. Cohrven poked a stick into the embers, entranced by the crackling flames. Silence ruled us both.

Neither of us seemed to be able to talk. Maybe that was for the best. He hadn't even looked at me since I fled from the gentleness of his hands, the tenderness of his gaze.

But the quiet was unsettling. Each sound the forest made had me glancing over my shoulder. I cleared my throat audibly and interrupted the crackling of the fire. "How close are we to Witherton?"

"Seven more days to the edge of the cavern. Witherton was a thriving underground city, but all accessible routes from the surface were deliberately caved in many millennia ago. I'll have to climb down into the forgotten bog that rests below. From the top of the cavern, getting to Witherton should take at

least a day—that is, if we even make it there.” He said the last part so casually, as if when death came for him in the murky depths, he would accept it as fate.

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“There are sisythstras in the bog.” Poking the fire again, he let the statement hang in the air, not bothering to elaborate any further.

“What are sisythstras?”

“Kingsdaughter,” he said, the use of that name slicing through me, “all I know of Witherton was discovered and recorded by my brother. I don’t want to think about him right now. Ask me in a few days.”

*His brother...* I didn’t want to think about Ehren either. What Cohrven had done to him. What he could do to me just as easily.

He held my gaze while he threw the stick he was holding onto the fire, grabbed his blanket, then turned his back to me to settle onto his pallet. I tightened my fists in frustration, and considered tapping a stick incessantly against the nearest rock as he tried to sleep.

In the morning, we set off without speaking to one another. I wasn’t sure if I preferred the quiet over arguing. But if he didn’t want to speak to me, I would return the favour.

Three days later, the sun was lingering high on the horizon when Cohrven yanked his reins, halting his whinnying horse and whipping his head to the left. Both of his swords unsheathed themselves from his back. One floated in the air while he grabbed the other with his left hand.

“Get down,” he ordered, swinging off his horse and leading it to the nearest tree. The seriousness in his tone made me follow him. He tied both of our horses to a low-hanging branch, his floating sword flipping through the air surrounding us.

“There are soldiers less than two hundred feet to the east. Could be mine, could be Osreth’s. We won’t know until we see them.”

“How do you know?”

“I had suspicions, so I took us in a wide circle. The clearing we passed through has been trampled down by six or seven fae, and who else would be following us but soldiers?”

“You’re saying that my uncle ordered soldiers to breach the truce between our courts in order to keep hunting us.” Such a transgression was a clear act of war. Osreth knew what he was openly declaring.

“Not necessarily. My father could have sent soldiers after me, but it’s doubtful. After last time...” He trailed off and pursed his lips.

“What are we going to do?” I asked, pulling his wandering thoughts back to the present.

“Surprise them before they have a chance to surprise us. Put us under an illusion.”

We were invisible to any other fae before he had finished speaking. “Done.”

“Follow me.” He stalked through the trees, his muscles tensed and ready to strike. Ahead of us, golden breastplates gleamed orange amongst the skeletal branches, giving away their positions before we could even hear their voices.

Osreth’s soldiers. He had sent more of them after us, even after the brutal violence we had inflicted upon the others. Familiar nausea upset my stomach. He wanted me dead that much.

Cohrven gripped his sword hilt so hard his hand turned white. “Keep me under an illusion. Stay back.”

He couldn’t have expected me to listen to his last order. And when he turned his head to find me prowling behind him, he didn’t protest. Up close, we heard raucous laughter. Someone shouted at the jovial soldiers to shut up, and the noise soon dissipated.

Cohrven stopped so abruptly, I almost ran into him.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” he snapped, shaking his head as if dismissing an intrusive memory. “Dagger out. Go for the throat.”

I nodded. Less than ten feet away, Cohrven speared his floating sword through the air. It stabbed through the closest soldier’s open mouth, the point sticking out the back of his head. The fae’s dead body dropped to the ground amongst panicked shouting.

“Nightheart!” The same voice as earlier roared, overwhelming the chaotic clanging of armour as soldiers withdrew their swords and positioned themselves. “Show yourself, coward!”

Cohrven scoffed. The next soldier went down the same as the first.

“Spread out,” the voice shouted. The remaining soldiers unwittingly formed a circle around us. Cohrven’s grotesque smile, I would see in nightmares.

BOOM.

I didn’t even see the lightning before it struck. My control over my illusion broke. The force sent me flying backwards, sparks tingling in my fingers.

Sprawled across the forest floor, I could only see flashes of white. My ears rang. When my vision did clear, everything was moving and tripled.

Three blurry Cohrvens struggled to stand next to three smoking craters. I was too far from him, thrown almost twenty feet by the blast. Soldiers circled him, and I could only watch. One had his arm raised, his palm open and his fingers curled, marking him as the Lightningcaller.

The Lightningcaller’s fingers twitched into a fist and Cohrven dove to his right, his movements still sluggish from the blast.

BOOM.

A blinding white bolt struck a tree, blackening its trunk and setting its branches on fire. With noticeable effort, Cohrven pulled himself up to one knee and lifted his head to the sky. I

crawled towards him, my head dazed and my limbs weak.

The fingers clenched into a fist.

Cohrven didn't move.

I screamed his name.

BOOM.

A sizzling bolt struck the Lightningcaller. The explosion rocked the earth, sending chunks of dirt flying.

All that remained of the Lightningcaller was a charcoal husk. His corpse looked like it had been burnt on a pyre, his golden armour red-hot and his helmet melted to his blackened skin. I stopped crawling and stared, not understanding why the Lightningcaller had killed himself.

Cohrven stood, the same grotesque smile stretching across his entire face.

Cohrven had done it—wrested the lightning from its master and redirected it towards him. Power like that... even after seeing it, I couldn't fully believe it.

“When I was your prisoner, did you ever think of what would happen to you if I was freed?” The ringing in my ears had lessened enough that I could hear the rough baritone of Cohrven's voice. I started dragging myself forward again, each movement bringing me closer to him.

A circle of soldiers surrounded him, each one frozen, the paralyzed fear on their faces plain enough that even I could see it from so far away. Their golden armour shattered into pieces all at once, leaving them vulnerable. Cohrven discarded the sharp remnants on the forest floor, the metallic chime almost beautiful.

Slowly, the soldiers' own swords drifted out of their hands.

The swords twirled in the air, their points digging into the skin of the soldiers' backs. Cohrven walked up to one with ash-blond hair and bent down to look into his terrified eyes. A dark, wet stain bloomed on the front of the soldier's trousers.

“Do you know how it feels to be stabbed in the back?”

Cohrven paused, cocking his head to the side and waiting for an answer he knew was never going to come. “No? Then allow me to show you.”

He straightened, raising his hands and opening his tattered wings. The swords stopped twirling. He dropped his arms and the swords dropped with them, one at a time, piercing straight through the soldiers and lodging into the ground.

The blond soldier was the last one. Cohrven’s eyes lit up with unhinged ecstasy as he bared his teeth.

He staggered.

*No.* Controlling the lightning had taken too much of his magic. He was...

With a clatter, the sword left Cohrven’s control and landed harmlessly on the blond soldier’s back before hitting the ground.

# Thirty-two

RECOVERING AS SOON as the sword fell, the blond soldier leapt towards Cohrven and grabbed him by his shirt collar, twisting and forcing him to the ground. Cohrven was too weak to even stay on his knees and collapsed to the forest floor, lying motionless on his side as he glared at the soldier.

“The Kingsdaughter must be truly mad if she helped you escape,” the blond soldier growled, sneering in disgust. “After I gut you, I’m going to drag her back to her uncle. Then I’ll ask for the honour of executing her myself.” He grabbed a fistful of Cohrven’s hair, and used it to haul him up to his knees. “You’re pathetic, Cohrven.” Releasing his grip, he swung his leg back and kicked Cohrven in the face, sending him crashing to the ground.

Cohrven could only grunt in pain, all his strength dissipated. As I crawled to him, I remembered what he had told me the day we set out—that if anything happened to him, he wanted me to leave him. Go back to the palace. Find Val.

I never even considered it. My arms were like jelly, but I used them to pull myself forward. Intense hatred fuelled each of my movements, keeping me from collapsing. I would never give up as long as I could still save him.

“It was so easy to gain your trust.” The soldier kicked Cohrven in the stomach, leaving him open-mouthed and gasping. “The monstrous Nightheart only wanted a friend—a *father*. Someone to confide in. Someone who wasn’t scared of him.”

Another kick to the stomach.

“What a surprise it was to learn the Nightheart was just a sad, lonely child.” Another kick. Bone snapped and Cohrven yelped. I lifted myself up, arms trembling.

For Cohrven, I willed my legs not to shake. For him, I heaved myself forward. For him, my fingers clutched the hilt of my dagger with bruising force.



The soldier walked over to his sword and picked it up, spinning it in a wide circle. When he looked about the forest, his eyes passed right over me. If he could have seen through my illusion, he would have started running.

“I should have done this the first day I met you.” The soldier grasped the hilt of his sword with both hands, the tip poised over Cohrven’s heart.

“I am death, Cohrven,” he stated with sickening bravado.

I had to laugh. Because he was wrong.

*I* was death. And I was coming for him.

He grinned and raised his sword. Right before he struck, I stabbed my dagger into his back so hard I heard the crack of his spine. With a shriek, he fumbled his sword, losing his grip and flinging it past Cohrven.

I stabbed again, fresh blood spewing into my face, staining my hands red. When I brought the dagger down a third time, I smiled, mimicking Cohrven’s grotesquery. With both hands on the dagger hilt, I steered him away from Cohrven’s prone body, leaving him to crumple on the ground after five steps.

Two more times, I brought my dagger down, punching holes in his back. Blood streamed from his wounds and bubbled from his mouth.

“Kingsdaughter,” he gurgled, with astonished, wide eyes.

I ignored him and rushed to Cohrven.

On the ground beside him, I lifted his shoulders onto my knees, sliding one arm under his neck for support. I brought my free hand up to his face and stroked my thumb along his unharmed cheekbone. The other had been shattered, the skin swollen and red.

I left a trail of blood that reached his jaw. His eyes cracked open just enough to see my green ones, then fluttered closed again as his body went limp and his head lolled to the side.

Wet coughing interrupted my inspection.

So, the soldier was still dying.

I looked at him from beneath my lashes, willing dark menace to bleed into my face. His eyes were still wide with fear, or shock, or both. I saw myself from afar, as he must have seen me in that moment—the golden-haired Kingsdaughter splattered with red, the Nightheart in my arms, wild protectiveness emanating from my every gesture.

I stared into his blue eyes until they glazed over, committing their terror to memory, revelling in it. His death had been my doing.

*I was death.* In my head, it sounded like the ravings of the *Madkingsdaughter*.

With utmost care, I settled Cohrven's head to the ground. As I placed my fingers on his neck to search for his pulse, to reassure myself that he would wake, something shifted inside of me. Whatever it was left a rift behind—not a hollow cavity, but an opening, a beginning. A promise of something more.

If that soldier had killed Cohrven, I would not have given him an easy death. I would have cut his veins out of his wrists while he still lived.

Cohrven's heartbeat pounded against my fingers, sluggish but steady. I breathed in time with it until my head grew heavy with exhaustion. Shaking my tired mind awake, I stood and surveyed the scene surrounding me.

I retrieved our horses first, grateful that neither of them put up a fuss. Next, I dragged the bodies fifty feet into the trees, far enough away that we wouldn't smell them when they started rotting. Afterwards, I found a stream to the east, splashed water on myself to get rid of the blood, and made a few trips back and forth to collect drinking water.

When I sat down after gathering sticks and starting a small fire, the heaviness returned to coat my limbs with iron. So, I began to hunt.

The lightning had driven most of the animals away, but I was able to find a plump rabbit foraging through the undergrowth. After skinning it, I speared it on a stick and stuck it into the flames just as the sun began to sink.

Cohrven woke up groaning as I sat cross-legged, my mouth watering at the delicious smell of rabbit meat sizzling over the fire. The next moment I was at his side.

He turned his head too far to the left, causing his broken cheekbone to shift. “*Fuck.*”

“Don’t move.” I gripped the sides of his head and forced him to listen. He grunted in compliance.

“You killed Ocher Silentsoul,” he rasped. I could have been wrong, but he almost sounded...proud.

“I did.”

“He was your uncle’s most talented spy.” Saying so much made him wince.

“Tell me about him later.” I traced the pad of my finger over the bruised patch on his cheek. “How do I heal this?”

“You’re not ready.” A part of me had been expecting his rejection, but my wings still drooped. “I’ll fix my face on my own, and you can work on my rib afterward.” The words grated through his throat. “I need water.”

Scrambling up, I ran to the pot that I had boiled over the flames earlier. I scooped some water into a tin cup and walked it over, being careful not to let any spill. “Here.”

With a grunt of effort, Cohrven lifted his shoulders off the ground to lean on one elbow. I supported him with a hand behind his neck, my fingers curling in his hair. I brought the cup to his lips and he covered my hand with his, tilting it up and drinking the water down greedily.

When he had drained the cup, he lifted it from his mouth, but he didn’t move his hand from mine. My gaze was trained on our entwined fingers.

*Burning.* I was burning again. If he kept touching me, I was sure my entire arm would light on fire.

I wrinkled my nose as I smelled that something was actually burning.

“The rabbit!” I sprinted back to the fire to the sound of

Cohrven's pained chuckle.

I arrived in time to salvage most of our meal. While I scraped charcoal off the rabbit, Cohrven held a hand to his cheek. I ate my share while he healed himself, licking my fingers clean and savouring every bite. Once Cohrven dropped his hand to the ground beside him, I brought the remainder of the rabbit over.

"You need to sit up to eat," I prompted, joining him on the ground and sitting back on my knees.

Clutching his ribs, he rose slowly. I studied him as he devoured his food. A faint gray bruise still covered most of the left side of his face, but the swelling had gone down. Judging by the way he was eating, he had been able to heal the bone.

His black hair was flat and dull, errant strands falling in front of his face. Purple shadows tinged the skin underneath his eyes, but they were borne of exhaustion, not the brutal beating he had just survived. For the next few days, he would be weak, but not enough that it would slow our progress.

"Do you want to try healing my rib?" he asked, setting the emptied stick to the side and unbuckling his breastplate.

"If you're fine with me trying." I waited as he removed his armour, then lifted his tunic up to his chest before lying on the ground again. A bruise had blossomed on the right side of his ribs. Nauseating shades of black and purple coloured his skin.

Remembering Ocher's savage kicks sent rage thrumming through me. But I stamped it down. He had paid his price.

"Put your hand over the broken bone." I followed Cohrven's instruction. As my fingers met his tender skin, he flinched, but didn't make a sound.

"Gather magic like usual." With ease, I willed magic to linger on my palm. "Now, one of the differences between healing internal and external wounds is that when healing internal wounds, like broken bones and punctured organs, you have to heal in pulses to direct the magic properly."

I was capable of that type of control.

“The other difference is that it takes much more magic.” Nervousness started to make my heart beat a little faster. “There is much more risk involved with internal injuries. I’ll show you what to do, and I want you to heal me as much as you can. But don’t forget that healing takes practice. If you’re doing something wrong, I will stop you immediately. Don’t feel bad, or discouraged, if I do. You’re still learning.”

I nodded.

“You need to push all the magic you’re holding out of your hand and into me, making sure that it ends up underneath my skin. You need to direct it to the injury—in this case, my broken rib. Don’t let it spread out. Think of the healing process as an ocean. Your magic is the large body of water and the pulses entering the injured person are the waves. If the wave is too large, it will drown them.”

I licked my dry lips. Envisioning what to do was easy when he described it that way. Actually accomplishing it, though...

“Begin whenever you feel comfortable,” he said. I took a deep breath and sent the first pulse of magic into his body, concentrating it to his broken rib. When he didn’t say anything in protest, I let my magic trickle through the gate I had trapped it behind, cutting off the flow quick enough that it didn’t cascade out of my palm like a waterfall.

The second pulse worked just as well as the first. *Too well*. I was overconfident and eager as I opened the gate for a third time.

When magic rushed through, I let more of it accumulate in my palm before closing the gate. Cohrven had said not to use too much, but the layer in my palm was still nothing to the vast river coursing through me.

I focused on leaching a slow pulse of my magic into Cohrven’s rib, but as soon as it left me, I lost control. Surging forward, the magic blasted from my hand. In my shock, I lost focus and the gate opened, all of my magic flooding through. Cohrven’s eyes widened at the first contact.

“Stop!” He grabbed my wrist and wrenched my hand from

his skin. Terror flooded me. Heavy breaths rattled my lungs as I thought of what I had almost done.

I had failed. *Again*. If Cohrven hadn't been paying attention, I would have drowned him in my magic.

"I'm sorry." I bowed my head and rested my hands on my thighs, digging my fingers into the fabric of my trousers.

"I told you it was difficult," Cohrven said. "I told you not to feel bad if I stopped you. So don't."

"But I didn't listen to your instructions. I let too much magic through and—"

"You made a mistake," he interrupted, "that I was fully expecting you to make."

I snapped my head up to glare at him. "Why even bother indulging me when you knew I wouldn't be able to heal you?"

"I wasn't indulging you. I was giving you a chance to practice." His fingers left my wrist to rest on the back of my trembling hand.

"I'm never trying it again. What if I had ki..." My voice broke. "What if I had hurt you?"

"I didn't let you hurt me." He sighed. "The only way you'll learn is if you practice."

"Cohrven, you didn't see yourself in that cave." I clenched my eyes shut as I relived the memory. "You had already lost so much blood, and when I tried to... I thought I had gotten it right. I thought you were going to be fine, and then blood started gushing from your nose and bursting from the cuts on your chest."

I couldn't meet his soft eyes. "In that moment, I knew I had killed you. After everything my uncle and his soldiers had done to you, after I had worked so hard to keep you safe, my hands were the ones that had ended your life."

My shoulders slumped as I let out a bitter laugh. "I was lucky Noranin showed up. Because you were dead. You couldn't even breathe."

“All I know,” Cohrven stated, “all I care about, is that you risked your life to save mine.” I let him slide his hand beneath mine to lace our fingers together. “Even knowing that it might kill you, you still tried to heal me.”

“And failed.” The blatant truth.

“I meant it when I said that you’re going to be an exceptional healer.” He squeezed my hand in reassurance, and the gesture felt so natural, as if it wasn’t the first time. “Please don’t give up. Not yet.”

I didn’t respond, instead choosing to stare at the ground intently. Visions of his spasming body, my hands red with his blood, still lingered in my mind. While he waited for me to respond, Cohrven spread his other hand over his broken rib.

“Do you mind?” he asked, as his callused fingers tightened around mine. I shook my head. The warmth of his hand was a distraction, and too comfortable, too familiar for me to let go. When he started healing himself, his large hand clamped mine in a vise grip.

Hissing through his teeth, he closed his eyes and curled his fingers against his rib. In admiration, I watched as the purples and grays of his bruise faded, leaving only smooth, pale skin behind. The bone snapped into place with a click, and his eyes shot open. He gripped my hand so hard I thought he might crush it.

He let his healing hand slip from his chest to land on the grass, and took deep, steady breaths as he recovered from the exertion.

I could learn to heal like he could, if I had the courage to. If I was willing to believe in myself, nothing could stop me.

“I won’t give up,” I promised. I never had before. And while I meant that I wouldn’t give up healing, I also meant so much more.

The past wouldn’t rule me. I was the Kingsdaughter.

Cohrven nodded in approval and made to disentangle our hands, but I held on. Despite the uneasiness snaking up my spine and screaming for me to let go, I held on. Above us,

stars were beginning to appear in the sky, bright, twinkling dots coming to life above the fading orange sunset.

When I chanced looking into Cohrven's beautiful brown eyes, I found questions hidden in their depths—ones I didn't have answers to. There was no way for me to convey the fear and the desire, how they stormed inside me, thundering through my blood and threatening to pour through my splintering skin. I only hoped that somehow, he understood.

It was enough to have his hand in mine. Enough to pretend that I wasn't a traitor and a fugitive with a price on my head. Enough to let myself be at peace.

Enough to look up at the night sky and make my decision to ask. Because if I didn't, how would I know? I recited the questions in my head.

*Cohrven, did you kill your brother? Why did you kill your brother?*

I couldn't bring myself to disturb him when his eyes drifted shut and his breathing slowed. He stayed soundly asleep as I released his hand.

I would have to wait.

I didn't know how I was going to speak those words out loud, but I knew that I was going to. Because I had to know the truth—all of it, whether that truth was good or evil, unforgivable or justifiable.



# Thirty-three

OCHER WAS THE one that captured you.” With pursed lips and an expression that betrayed nothing, Cohrven looked back at me, unfazed by my delayed realization. “For my uncle,” I clarified. He nodded once, then stared off into the trees.

“How?”

Prolonged silence followed my question.

“Ocher’s magic is persuasion.” His tone was somber. “He showed up in Hjairn one day, calling himself Gerin Silversoul, and enlisted in the army. Using his persuasion, he talked his way up through the ranks within months. Everyone liked him. He was friendly, good-humoured, and a strong swordsman. He made sure to talk to me often so that his persuasion didn’t wear off. No one questioned his quick rise in position.”

Cohrven’s shoulders drooped as he hunched forward, curling in on himself. “You know the rest. I mistook a lack of fear for friendship. Then I mistook that so-called friendship for trust.” He took a shuddering breath and accidentally held his reins too tight, causing his horse to neigh and stomp her hooves in discomfort before he eased his grip. “When necessary, I lead a squad that carries out critical and dangerous missions. There had been reports of an unknown monster terrorizing the citizens of Ulruth, a city in the far east. My father sent me to put it down.”

“Ocher was part of your squad,” I guessed.

“Right before we reached Ulruth, we were ambushed by your uncle’s soldiers. Ocher had probably persuaded someone at court to make up the story that Ulruth was being attacked to lead me to them. The soldiers were too fast, too unexpected. I killed most of them, but my entire squad was slaughtered. Except Ocher.

“He came up behind me, jabbed my neck, and injected me with whitereaver. It’s a rare, expensive drug found in the bud of its namesake flower that causes paralysis—of body and

magic. I was in and out of consciousness for a month as they took me to the Sun Palace. We arrived the day before Midsummer's Eve. I hardly knew anything by that point. Only that everything hurt and I wanted to annihilate everyone in the Sorcen Court."

I should have made Ocher suffer more. Death had been a mercy for him.

"You're not pathetic because that happened to you, Cohrven." I could hear him accusing himself in the tightness of his voice; I could see it in his drawn-in shoulders.

"I am." He scoffed. "Ocher was right."

"No." I squeezed my thighs and urged my horse to catch up to his. "*Ocher* was a pathetic, disgusting little worm. And he died like one."

That made the corners of his mouth twitch into a smile. "Thank you, Allina."

I could tell it still weighed on him—letting his guard down enough to be captured by someone he had trusted.

"I've never heard of whitereaver." A drug that could prevent the victim from using magic seemed impossible.

"I-I..." Cohrven stuttered out of nowhere, losing his composure. "I had encountered it once before." His hands began to tremble.

"I don't think that my uncle's soldiers will be hunting us anymore." I changed the subject abruptly, rushing the words from my mouth. "Ocher was his final option."

It was like I hadn't even spoken. He stared at nothing, removed from the immediate and immersed elsewhere. I worried at the blankness that had come over his face.

"Cohrven?" I prompted.

He blinked. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Your hands are shaking."

He looked down at them in amazement before clenching them into tight fists. "So they are," he said. I didn't press any

further.

“We won’t have to worry about any more of my uncle’s soldiers.”

“I agree.” His recovery was quick. “He won’t want to waste any more of them.”

His meaning sunk in and my heart started to beat too fast. *No*. My uncle couldn’t...

But he *could*, and he *would*.

“He’s going to attack Liral.”

“Without a doubt. If he goes back on his plans, he’ll be seen as spineless. A ripe candidate for the Sorcen throne to be wrested from. He may even think he’s going to win.”

“What will your father do?”

Cohrven slowed his horse to a walk. “What do you think he should do?”

“He should let the Sorcen army cross over to Liral. That will be an unprovoked act of war by my uncle. The entire Liral Court will be behind your father as he defends them and drives out Osreth.”

“He’ll want to keep going.” Cohrven observed me unabashedly, curious about my reaction. “Osreth will have given him the perfect motive to conquer Sorcen. Our subjects will support him.”

“That’s why, when we return to Sky’s End after your wings have been healed, I’m going to ask for a favour in front of the whole court, as payment for saving your life and for the use of my magic in the pending war against my uncle.”

“And I will support you.”

The more we discussed our plan, the more I believed in its success. But that belief was still dangerous, still reliant on the hope that Cohrven could predict Heron’s actions.

“If he promises only to defend Liral without trying to claim Sorcen for himself, do you think he’ll keep his word?”

“I don’t know.” Cohrven was honest, unwilling to quell my nervousness by lying. “But as long as I keep the War Council on my side, he won’t defy them. His command is law, but he thinks very highly of their opinions, even if he knows that I’m the one influencing those opinions.”

“You have that much sway?”

“I’m the Arch General, the second-highest-ranking member of our military, beneath my father. With the exception of him, I have absolute power. If my father is not present, he has given me the discretion to speak with his authority and to make binding decisions that he will honour. Regardless of the reasons for my infamy, I am also the face of our army.”

“He must have tremendous faith in you.” Heron had entrusted his son with control of *his* military by all rights. If Cohrven wanted to, he could use that power against Heron. I didn’t insult him by bringing up that possibility. He loved his family too much to consider betraying his father.

“I suppose he does,” Cohrven said, his tone flat. I thought back to the fight I had witnessed between Heron and Cohrven in that empty hallway. Then, I didn’t know what to make of it. I still didn’t. There was visceral, lingering anger between Cohrven and his father, and whether it was enough to eventually fracture their relationship, I couldn’t tell.

Cohrven went quiet. I followed him in equal silence as the path we had travelled on for so many days disappeared. As the day wore on, we stopped unpredictably as Cohrven searched through the trees for signs that I never recognized. When he found whatever he was looking for, he would mutter to himself, and we would continue on our way.

At night, as I sat alone on a fallen, dry tree trunk in front of a roaring fire, I decided that I was going to ask.

Cohrven was foraging in the trees somewhere, cutting logs for the fire and collecting sticks for kindling. The temperature had dropped, the cool air only bearable if I wrapped myself in a blanket.

Two days and we would be at the very edge of the cavern.

Three days and we would encounter the Wither—if it even existed.

I recited the familiar rhyme in my head:

*Wither, wither, whispers the bog*

*Wither, wither, croaks the frog*

*Your flesh will melt and you will rot*

*If you ask the Wither for that which you've sought*

*But if you want, want more than your soul*

*The Wither may grant your selfish goal*

*Stay away, stay away, heed this advice*

*For the Wither always takes its price.*

It sounded more ominous every time I repeated it in my head. The last line sent chills up my spine.

*The Wither always takes its price.*

Bushes began rustling and Cohrven emerged before I had time to panic. He set a pile of sticks down by the fire and sat on the same dead tree trunk as me, and as far away as possible. As I watched, he lifted his arm in front of him and took control of some stray pebbles, looping them about his arm in a steady stream, sending them up into the air, then bringing them back around again.

When a slight smile graced his features, I couldn't stop staring.

Cohrven was devastating—the kind of handsome that captivated without effort. His black hair feathered against his cheekbones, the layers unkempt from days of travel. I yearned to run my fingers through the strands, to expose the gleaming skin of his neck and press my lips to his thrumming pulse, to hear his reaction, to revel in it.

His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showcasing his strong forearms, corded with muscle and engraved with light scars. Pebbles circled his wrist, drawing my attention to his hands—those hands that could inflict violent agony in one

breath and relieve it with such tenderness the next.

I was falling. I was drowning. I was ignoring everything that had once mattered and I didn't care.

So I had to ask. I had to know. Even as dread almost paralyzed me at the prospect.

Val and Rian said he would tell me. They had told me not to be scared.

“Cohrven, did you kill your brother?” My voice was barely more than a whisper.

The pebbles dropped to the ground. Dark eyes reflected the flickering firelight as they met mine.

# Thirty-four

I KILLED HIM.” He said it so easily, as if we were talking about something inconsequential. My heart pounded so hard I was sure he could hear its beating. “The rumours are generous.”

“What do you mean?” I croaked. He cocked his head to the side, gauging my reaction. I kept my face hard as stone.

“I’ve heard them all. And what I did to him was worse.” He searched my face. “Do you want to know the truth of it, Kingsdaughter? You just need to ask.”

I didn’t hesitate. “Tell me the truth.”

“I stabbed him twenty-six times with his own dagger. When I was finished, the floor was slick with his blood; I was coated in red—my hands, my arms, my face.”

I had to look back to the fire, away from his glowing eyes.

“When he was all dressed up in his casket, I stayed beside it until his internment. I slept in the temple every night. I sat there every day. Once the funeral was over and everyone was gone, I watched the masons seal his mausoleum, just to make sure he couldn’t get out. To make sure he was truly *dead*.”

A tremor ran down my spine. When I chanced looking at him again, he hadn’t moved. His eyes were still trained on my face, his expression impassive—bored, even.

“How can you talk about it as if it means nothing?” I swallowed, my throat closing in. I tensed my muscles, ready to fly far away from the monster beside me.

“Practice.” He let out a cynical huff of laughter when I grimaced. “Take me back to that moment, and I would do it again. Every single time.”

The Nightheart was in front of me now, proving everything I had willingly overlooked. Believing that Cohrven was more than a remorseless monster had been childish. Almost losing

myself in him had been absurdity.

“Why?” I asked. When he said nothing, I elaborated. “Why did you kill him?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “Why does it matter to you? To anyone?” He stood, turning his back to me. “I killed my brother. That’s the beginning of it, and that’s the end of it. I am the Nighthead. I will bear that name long after I’m done rotting in my own tomb.”

I opened my mouth to ask again, but he wheeled and advanced on me with blazing eyes, and the words stuck in my throat.

“My father gave me the name,” he stated. “Everyone was calling me it behind my back, but he made it official. He stripped away my old one and named me *Nighthead*. It made me sound like I was someone *powerful*, someone to be *feared*. That’s what he said.”

A short pause.

“I was *twelve*.”

His voice cracked and it was like a storm ending, the violent clouds opening up to a clear sky, the wind calming to a gentle breeze. And I knew that he hadn’t told me everything, that there was more to the simple narrative he had spun.

Val said he was scared. There had to have been a reason for it. And he hadn’t given me one yet.

He held his head in his hands and sank to his knees. My chest tightened as he tried to hold back silent sobs, his broad shoulders shaking at the effort. I steeled myself before kneeling beside him and resting a hand on his shoulder. He flinched, but didn’t jerk away.

Shudders wracked his body, and I rubbed his shoulder in what I hoped was a soothing gesture. Now that I was closer, I could hear the broken sounds of grief escaping his mouth.

“It matters to me,” I whispered. I needed the whole truth. “Why did you kill your brother, Cohrven?”

He breathed in deep. Just when I thought he wasn’t going to



answer, he spoke.

“I was playing with Val in her room.” He spoke through gritted teeth, like he was trying to keep his lips from trembling. “She was five years old, and she loved making me play pretend with her dolls. Ehren barged in, fresh from training, and started laughing at me for wasting time with Val instead of fighting with him. I didn’t care. I told him to leave us alone. That was my first mistake. Then I ignored him. I kept playing with Val like he had never entered the room in the first place. That was my second mistake.”

He moved back sit on his heels, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Ehren didn’t like being ignored. He liked attention. He liked reactions. He liked any excuse to inflict pain. So, he hauled me up and starting pushing me around the room, punching me while goading me to fight back. I was used to it by then. Anytime I did something that he decided he didn’t like, anytime I was better than him at anything, he would catch me alone and make me pay.

“I took his hits without retaliating, but then he broke my nose. Val had been crying, but when she saw the blood streaming down my face, she shrieked and begged Ehren to stop. He started yelling at her. I could barely make sense of it, but then he said, ‘If you don’t shut up, it’ll be just like last time.’

“She went so quiet, her entire body trembling with fear. And I realized that he had been abusing her too. He had been hurting our baby sister and I had been letting him by being so oblivious. I snapped and starting punching him back.

“Ehren was tall for his age, and he was much bigger than I was. I caught him off guard with a punch to his jaw. I had never seen him so angry. His face went bright red, his veins bulging from his temples. He ignored my fists, then he wrapped his hands around my throat, pinned me to the wall, and squeezed as hard as he could. I couldn’t breathe and I knew he was going to kill me. Every time I tried to freeze him, he broke free and squeezed harder.

“I was dying and I was flailing, trying to push him off. My

hand brushed against a dagger in his belt. I unsheathed it, and, instinctively, stabbed it into his side. He was only wearing a tunic, so the dagger went in deep. Then I stabbed him again.

“The look on his face... he was so shocked, he just released his grip and staggered backwards. I pounced on him and stabbed him in the gut, and I kept stabbing and stabbing, even when he was twitching on the floor, covered in blood.

“A maid rushed in. She had heard Val’s screams, and I guess I had been yelling too, though I don’t remember anything I said. She took one look and shrieked so loud that more servants flew in, even some nobles, and they all saw Ehren’s dead body, the red dagger in my hand, and all that blood pooling on the marble floor.

“My mother arrived and forced everyone out. She came to me and took the dagger from my hands. I told her what happened, and Val told her side, and you know what my mother did? She hugged me, getting bloodstains on her beautiful blue dress. She wiped my tears and told me that I was brave. Then she rolled up her sleeves and showed me the countless bruises Ehren had given her.

“The official announcement was that Ehren and I were play-fighting and there had been an unfortunate accident. No one believed *that*. My parents tried to keep everyone quiet, but the real story, that I had stabbed him to death, got out and ran rampant.

“I became the Nighthead. So mad for power he murdered his own brother to become heir to the throne. So evil he felt no remorse. A monster in the eyes of all.

“When I die and my spirit descends to Helveda, I will suffer for eternity and I will smile. Because my suffering will have been worth it. I would do it all over again. I would rip Ehren to pieces with my bare hands to stop him from hurting my family, or anyone else.

“I never wanted to kill my brother. I never wanted to be the Nighthead. But I am, and I’ve lived with it, and I *will* live with it. Now you know. Judge me as you like, Allina.”

*Judge me as you like.*

I had been so wrong. So horribly wrong. Remembering all of my misguided arrogance, all that I had said, all that I had done in the belief that Cohrven had maliciously murdered his brother made me nauseous.

He was waiting for me to say something, but I couldn't make sense of my jumbled thoughts. When I looked at him, I saw that little, terrified twelve-year-old boy holding that dagger and doing what he had to do—to save his sister, to save himself.

I knew why Ehren's mausoleum was blank and hidden in the far corner of the cemetery. I knew why Cohrven didn't want anyone to go near the gray slabs that encased his brother's remains. I knew why his family still loved him. I knew why Val was so defensive. I knew why Rian was such a loyal friend. Because I knew who the Nightheart really was behind his name.

"I've been unfair to you."

"No." He shook his head. "You were right to be wary. After all that you'd heard about me, you were right not to trust me. To you, I was someone who had killed his brother, whose every *word*, every *movement*, entailed violence."

His tears had dried, but I could hear the enduring sadness clinging to every word he spoke.

I thought back to the first couple of weeks we travelled together. In Noranin's cottage, I had attacked him first. We had both started fights, and we had both killed to keep ourselves safe.

Cohrven hadn't found any pleasure in it, like I had expected of the Nightheart. He had told me once that to survive he would do whatever he had to, even if it wasn't honourable. His ruthlessness had kept us alive.

In my righteous superiority, I had seen him as an untamed beast, lashing out at any whim. But he had only been a son trying to return to his parents, a brother trying to return to his sister. Tortured and wounded, scared and desperate, he had

only been trying to get home alive.

“I’m sorry,” I said. His eyes flashed and he opened his mouth to protest, but I shook my head. “Let me have this apology.”

I reached up to trail my fingertips down his jaw. When I went to let my hand fall, he held it there gently.

“I’m sorry too. For it all. For everything, and I...” He trailed off. What he couldn’t say, I understood in his averted gaze. “Can you—” He paused for a moment, releasing my hand and standing with his back to me again. “Can you make an even stronger illusion? Can you make it so that all the Wither senses is that I want my wings to be healed, more than anything else in the world?”

“I don’t know,” I answered, lifting myself from the ground. “Don’t you want your wings to be healed more than anything?”

“I do. It’s just—” He turned his head to the side, towards me, but all I could see was his black hair, the curve of his cheekbone. “I want so many other things just as much.”

I wanted to reach out to him, to coax him to face me so that I could look into his eyes and read what I saw in them.

*What do you want?* I almost asked.

“I’ll try,” I promised instead, keeping my hands still.

“Thank you.” The words left his mouth as a soft whisper. Then the world was quiet. And I was grateful for it, because in my head, it was loud.

No fear choked me anymore. No guilt weighed me down. Hope remained, growing stronger every breath I took.

Together, Cohrven and I would heal his wings. Together, we would return to Hjairn and end Osreth’s war before it even began.

*Together.*

# Thirty-five

THE BOG DID whisper. Just like the rhyme said.

*Wither*, whistled the wind as it rustled the trees choked with vines.

*Wither*, buzzed the insects floating across the stagnant water and soaring through the humid air.

*Wither*, croaked the frogs, their bulging black eyes glistening in the shadows.

I didn't know how anything lived in the bog, as devoid of light as it was, but the cavern was full of constant movement and noise, like we were traversing inside a living creature. The orange of the sun above reached the ground in patches, illuminating the bog in ever-changing swaths.

Like Cohrven had estimated, it had taken him almost an entire day to climb down the rocks to the bog through an inconspicuous crack in the barren ground. I hovered by his side the entire way, ensuring that I could at least try to catch him if he fell.

I flew above the mire while Cohrven trudged through it with a frown. He was still damp with sweat, his wet hair finally beginning to dry. Each step he took sucked his feet deeper, until his boots were caked in mud and his trousers were soaked to the knees. Thanks to my illusion, the creatures lurking in the shadows couldn't hear his struggle, but I didn't know for how long.

The sisythstras lived in the darker areas of the bog, apparently, and Cohrven had said they had strong instincts. He wasn't exactly sure what they were capable of, but in their bestiary his grandparents had described them as sentient extensions of nature—their limbs built from the branches of trees, their blood thickened with soil.

If so, it was possible that my illusion wouldn't fool them, just like it couldn't fool actual trees. We wanted to avoid a

fight, but Cohrven and I had decided on a battle strategy just in case. Hopefully we wouldn't have to employ it.

Our success relied on so many uncertainties. Would we make it to Witherton? Did the Wither even exist? Did Cohrven want the Wither to heal his wings enough? Would the Wither kill him for asking?

Since last night, he had been reserved. I didn't mind the silence, as long as he was still beside me, but I wished I knew what he was thinking. If he was frightened, I wanted to tell him that I was too, and that we'd live through this. If he was imagining himself as Ehren, forging through the bog in search of power, I wanted to assure him that he wasn't the same as his brother.

Ahead, there was a solitary branch sticking out of the water, pointing to the sky.

"Look to your right," Cohrven ordered, "until I tell you to look forward again." He was serious enough that I listened, until he tripped and ended up on his hands and knees.

I landed with a splash, water soaking through my boots. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." From the corner of my eye, I could see the branch protruding between us. I lowered my gaze and froze. Skeletal fingers were pointing up at me, the bone brown from rot.

Cohrven had tripped over a *body*. I couldn't stop my heart from battering against my ribs in fear. Dead fae were in the bog, their corpses lurking below the surface. My boot could have been grazing one for all I knew.

Panic made me take a quick step back, but mud had swallowed my boots and my feet were fixed in place. I lost my balance and fell backwards as the infested water tainted by decay waited to engulf me. Before I had the chance to scream, Cohrven caught me by my waist. He pulled me forward until I was standing up again.

"I can't move my feet." Terror leached into my voice. I tried to discipline myself, but I was trapped and hysteria was

bubbling up inside me.

“You’ll be able to soon.” Cohrven was calm, controlled. “Hold onto my shoulders.”

With trepidation, I leaned over and clung to his shoulder guards. The skeleton’s fingers pointed right at my chest. After kneeling, Cohrven grasped my ankle with both hands. He was so close to the body beneath us.

“Lift your foot with me.”

It took a few moments of pulling, but my foot soon slid from the mud with a loud squelch. I held it up as Cohrven moved to my other ankle. One, swift tug, one flap of my wings, and I was flying up into the air, free of the bog.

“Thank you,” I said. He stood and wiped his wet hands dry on his armour.

“Any time.” A pleased grin flashed across his face before vanishing just as fast.

Deeper into the bog, light became even more scarce. Laden with moss, the trees obstructed most of the sparse sun trying to shine through their branches, and I had to rely on my hearing more than my sight.

The first rustle, I barely noticed. The second one, I heeded.

A tree ahead of us slithered, uprooting itself and snaking through the pungent water, ripples reaching Cohrven’s boots.

“Sisythstra,” Cohrven whispered. Even in the low light, I could see the shine of hungry eyes as the creature saw through my illusion and shattered it.

“They can see us,” I whispered, alerting Cohrven. He mumbled a curse. The sisythstra’s eyes gleamed, as if light was circling inside its pupils. Then there were hundreds of identical eyes staring at us from every angle.

“You remember?” Cohrven asked. He unsheathed his twin swords and shifted into a fighting stance.

“I remember.” Our plan of defense against the sisythstras wasn’t foolproof, but with Cohrven stuck on the ground, we

didn't have many options. I grasped my dagger, my leather gauntlets allowing me a solid grip that my sweaty palms wouldn't have had.

"There are more than I expected," Cohrven muttered, trying to calm his nerves by twirling his swords in tandem.

"Scared?" I asked, trying to stamp my own worry down. If the Nightheart feared anything, there was always a good reason.

"Never," he scoffed. The moment stretched for eternity. I hovered, anticipation making me tremble. Cohrven stood like he was made of stone, his wings flared unconsciously.

One breath.

Two breaths.

The first one sprang, screeching so loud the sound must have been heard miles away. Water splashed as it charged through the bog towards Cohrven on all fours, its wooden teeth sharpened into jagged points, its torso gnarled and twisted like an ancient oak.

The sisythstra vaulted at Cohrven, claws primed to tear his guts open. Right before the strike landed, the sisythstra stopped. Suspended in mid-air, only the sisythstra's eyes could move, swirling around in confusion. Before it realized what was happening, I stabbed my dagger into the back of its head and thick, gritty sap spewed from the hole I made.

Certain of its demise, Cohrven let its corpse drop to the ground. Around us, a chorus of snapping noises began as the beasts conversed.

From behind Cohrven, another sisythstra charged. He didn't even have to turn around. Its teeth were inches from his neck when he stopped it. Again, I brought my knife down and shattered its skull, spraying sap.

Soon, the sisythstras would swarm. They were only testing us, to see how formidable we were as opponents. I only hoped that Cohrven's magic could hold out long enough for us to scare them off, because if it didn't, we were dead. And this would all have been meaningless.



A third one made a mad dash towards Cohrven, sacrificing itself in another suicidal charge.

“Leave the next one to me.” Cohrven lifted his swords. “I want to find something out.”

The sisythstra leapt, and Cohrven swung his sword, but he didn't end its life with the brutal efficiency I had come to expect from him. Sword stabbed into the sisythstra's gut, Cohrven rammed its wriggling body into the water below. I was confused, until I saw the bubbles coming to the surface as the sisythstra struggled to breathe.

“They need air.” I had already guessed at the plan forming in his mind.

Nodding, Cohrven watched impassively as the bubbles stopped. Dangerous, glowing eyes burned into him, not me. He was the threat. He would be taken down first.

They didn't know that was what we expected. I needed to conserve my magic for the Wither. Using my illusions, I could have drawn a competing predator out of the shadows to occupy the sisythstras while we slipped past unnoticed. That was the safer option, but Cohrven and I had considered every possibility and decided against it.

My magic was needed later, so he would use his now. From all sides, the sisythstras began attacking. They converged on Cohrven, howling like they were enjoying a fight they expected to win.

Without any visible effort, Cohrven froze the first wave mid-lurch, leaving their maws gaping and dripping with sap. The creatures' bodies were no longer their own as Cohrven submerged their motionless forms into the water.

“Easy.” Cohrven didn't bother to look down as he took the lives of so many beasts. When he smiled—a wicked slash of his mouth—the whimpers started.

Calls of remembered grief, of great loss, of unmistakable fear, surrounded us. Eyes began to blink out in the trees, those circling lights disappearing as the mournful cries grew louder. Beneath Cohrven, water filled the trapped sisythstras' lungs,

but, before they could drown, he brought them to the surface.

Water cascaded from their mouths as they ran from him, joining their brethren in retreat.

“What are they doing?” Cohrven stepped forward, as if he was conflicted about whether or not to chase them down and finish them off.

“I think they’re scared. When you smiled, they just... stopped.”

“When I smiled, they stopped,” Cohrven repeated, his shoulders sagging and swords falling as his aggression dissipated. “When I smile, I look like my brother. Or so my father tells me.”

He looked at his reflection in the murky water, and I don’t know what he saw in it, but it was enough to make him stomp his boot and disturb the glossy surface.

“When I smile, I am Ehren. I wonder what he did to them. He must have loved doing it, whatever it was. Even now, they remember. Even now, they can’t forget his face.”

I had no words of comfort. If I had known Ehren, would I have seen him in Cohrven? I would never know, and I wouldn’t lie to him.

# Thirty-six

THE DAY PASSED as Cohrven trudged through the bog with discipline, his pace untouched by fatigue. My wings grew sore from the never-ending flight and sometimes I thought about dropping to the ground, but I didn't dare to let even my toe drag against the mire beneath me. The stench of decay was constant and unchanging. Unfortunately, I was getting used to it.

Though there were no obvious cracks in the ceiling that let more sunlight intrude into its hazy darkness, the cavern began to brighten. Spotting a broken stone wall fifty paces away, I left Cohrven behind and flew ahead. Soon, I saw half-submerged rubble that stretched on as far as my eyes could see in the dim light. From above, I could see the square patterns the crumbling, stacked stone was arranged in—the preserved foundations of houses and other buildings, all destroyed ages ago.

“It's Witherton,” I shouted to Cohrven. We had found the rumoured forgotten city. The reality that everything Cohrven believed in may not have been a myth was sinking in.

Taking a moment to rest my wings, I landed on a misshapen pile of stone and stretched my aching muscles. Not long after, Cohrven was beside me, crossing his arms and surveying the ruins.

“This has to be Witherton,” he said. “It's just like what Ehren wrote.”

“I didn't think it would be so expansive.” I squinted into the distance, trying to find where the rubble ended.

“Witherton was once the largest city in all of existence,” Cohrven supplied. “Everyone who had the means to, even the humans, would come to have their greatest desire granted. Some of them lived, but most of them did not. More blood has been spilled here than anywhere else in the entirety of history.”

He ran a finger along the ancient stone, grime coating his

skin.

“Why was it abandoned?”

“The stories say that Kaltianen was angered and destroyed Witherton with the help of my ancestors. Afterwards, she caved in the tunnels leading to Witherton, created the bog, and hid whatever remained of the city beneath the water, hoping that if it was obscured from sight, it would be forgotten. With time, the Wither became a legend. The truth, though, is that the Wither exists. Kaltianen could not destroy it. In its own way, it is as old and powerful as she is. Every couple of centuries or so, those who believe will seek the Wither, and the brave will find it. And if they want enough, their wish will be granted.”

“You’re so certain of its existence.”

“And you’re so sceptical.” He began trudging through the water again, beckoning me to follow. “Ehren wrote that the Wither rests in the remains of a temple.”

I didn’t believe. I couldn’t. But as the temple came into sight—the only standing structure in the ruined city—my apprehension grew.

The hair on the back of my neck stood as we approached the chipped stone stairs leading up to the once-grand structure. The roof had caved in long ago, but three stone walls oozing with slime and speckled with moss still stood tall, their windows intact, the panes stained black with rot. The whole building spoke of greatness that was once unparalleled, reduced to waste.

“Illusion,” Cohrven prompted. I made myself invisible. If it existed, the Wither couldn’t know that I was there. My illusions *had* to work on it. If not, our whole plan would fail.

I flew beside Cohrven as he walked up the steps, swords drawn. My little dagger wouldn’t do much, but I clutched it in my hand anyways.

After walking through the arched entrance, the wooden doors long rotted, Cohrven stopped abruptly. Trees had overgrown the inside of the temple and creeping vines choked

the walls, but a circle of stone lay in the very middle of the empty floor, gleaming a brilliant white untouched by time. All else had decayed, but the stone was ageless. Unnaturally so.

I dropped to the floor outside the circle, just as Cohrven placed one foot inside. My heart battered against my ribs in an uneven pounding, and I couldn't get it to stop. Something in the temple bred fear, and I was giving in to its call.

One moment, the circle was empty. The next, the Wither was there. I screamed at its hulking form, the sound going unheard by the myth made real.

It was fae-like, in a way, with two arms, two legs, and one head. Whatever it was made of, though, was not flesh and blood and bone. What looked like thin gray strings writhed and twisted to create a semblance of a fae form.

It seemed to flash in and out of existence, its body never staying in one place. At times, I could see right through its torso to the other side of the temple. As for features, it had none—no eyes, no mouth, and no nose.

“Prince Cohrven Nighthart, you have honoured me as your brother did.” Its voice was grating, like steel dragging along stone. Cohrven didn't even blink. Swords primed to defend, he stood tall, facing the Wither with a haughty expression.

“I want you to heal my wings,” he said. “Make them just as they used to be three months before this day, with no changes.”

“Then you know what I must do.” The Wither flickered, only to appear a hair's breadth from Cohrven. Somehow, he didn't flinch.

“You want so many things, Nighthart.” The Wither seemed... disappointed. “I can hardly make sense of them.

“Ah, yes, I know them all,” it said, reacting to Cohrven's astonishment. “Safety for your family. Peace. Prosperity. Strength. Ehren wanted to be powerful, but you already are. There is so much more in you than there was in him.”

“This is *not* about Ehren,” Cohrven refuted.

“With you, almost everything is about Ehren.” The Wither flashed, only to reappear behind Cohrven. “Despite all your wants, you don’t want him back. You don’t want to change the past. You’re glad he’s rotting in his tomb. How contrary.”

“Heal my wings.” Cohrven remained unaffected by the Wither’s provocations.

“You want so much and so little. Yes, you are an enigma,” the Wither mused, stoking Cohrven’s irritation, the lilt of laughter clinging to its words.

“Give me what I want.”

The Wither shook its head. “I could have, had you asked for it.”

Cohrven recoiled, eyes flaring.

“Don’t think you can hide it from me, Nighthead,” the Wither shouted triumphantly, its semblance of fingers curling into claws. “I can feel the desire coursing through your veins. I know how you restrain yourself, how you fight it *every* waking moment.”

“*No*,” Cohrven begged, suddenly out of breath. “Please don’t—”

“I can feel the want poisoning your blood, making you salivate. You’re just a rabid animal.” The Wither cackled, an unbearable screeching. “Oh, yes, I can see her *golden hair*.”

*My hair.*

The words rattled me, but I ignored them. I had to focus. I had to—

*Cohrven wanted me more than anything in the world.*

“I want you to heal my wings!” Cohrven roared, stomping his foot and shaking the temple. Stone crashed to the floor and the blackened windows shattered, shards of broken glass raining down, coating the floor with piles of debris.

“You aren’t enough, Nighthead. Ehren would have burned you all to get what he wanted. You do not want as much as he did.”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t.” The Wither sounded bored, like none of this had been worth its time. “And thus, your life ends.”

“No,” Cohrven said. “It doesn’t.”

I loosed my illusion, praying to Kaltianen that it worked.

“What is this, then?” Numerous Cohrvens surrounded the Wither, all identical, down to the sweat cresting his brow.

“I have a game to suggest.” I made Cohrven’s imitations speak at the same time, mirroring him to even the slight twitch of a smile on his lips. “If you can find me, you can kill me. If you can’t, then you will heal my wings.”

“I do not play games.”

“Then you forfeit. My wings, please.”

Growling, the Wither slashed through the Cohrven standing in front of him, accepting the bargain.

“Wrong,” Cohrven said. “Try again.”

“Do not test me, you petulant child.” Again, the Wither slashed, and another imitation Cohrven disappeared.

“If you’re so strong, finding me shouldn’t be a problem. Do you not respect power? Do you not crave it?”

“My power is beyond your comprehension, Nightheart. You are nothing.”

“Then you should be able to find me,” Cohrven taunted. He gave a careless laugh and opened his arms in a challenge. With a snarl, the Wither lunged again, slashing empty air with its writhing hands.

I lifted into the air, relieved at the scene below. The true Cohrven stood off to the side, far from the Wither’s reach. Again and again, the Wither slashed and failed, until there was only one of Cohrven’s imitations left.

“The game is over,” Cohrven said. “I win.”

The Wither raised its claws. “I don’t think so.”

Cohrven’s last imitation danced out of the way, his strings

pulled by my will. Every strike, the Wither missed. From my perch above, I could counter its forecasted intentions with ease.

“Honor our bargain,” Cohrven demanded. “I know you’re bound to your word—chaos bound by order. It’s only natural. What would happen, I wonder, if you broke that sacred binding? Would you crumble to dust?”

“I have never tested the order to which I am bound, Nightheart. Perhaps I should, just to send you to rot in Helveda. Kaltianen will not favour a coward such as you. You are weak. You do not want what you should.”

The Wither spoke of Kaltianen as an ally, or an adversary. I had no doubt anymore that she existed—that any of this was a myth. The gods were real. Cohrven’s wings, darker than the night sky—they were gifts bestowed upon his ancestors by their patron god.

“Grant my wish,” Cohrven shouted, growing tired of the Wither’s provocations. “I’m selfish enough for you, aren’t I? What I want I do not deserve, and I want it regardless.”

Hearing him so unabashedly honest made me feel like the air had been knocked from my lungs.

“Fine.” A hint of amusement resonated in the crackling of the Wither’s voice. “In return, I will have one answer from you.”

Cohrven nodded and waited with tensed shoulders until the Wither asked, “What do you fear the most?”

“I will *never* tell you.” Despite his defiant words, Cohrven’s face crumpled into uncertainty.

The Wither cackled, a sound like branches snapping. “You already have.”

Cohrven backed away, preparing to flee for his life as the Wither somehow grew larger, its strings twisting faster as it became more unravelled. “I will grant you your wings, Nightheart.”

It flickered away from Cohrven, returning to the centre of its



ageless circle.

“But first,” it said, looking to the sky, “show yourself, Princess Allina Kingsdaughter.”

# Thirty-seven

I DIDN'T REACT. *HOW could it know that I was there?* My earlier illusions had fooled it completely.

“Your presence is a familiar one, even concealed by your magic. I admit that I didn't recognize it at first. Now I do.”

Hesitantly, I banished my illusion and became visible. As long as I didn't ask it for anything, it couldn't harm me. Or so I hoped.

“Those eyes, green as spring. I could not soon forget them,” the Wither reminisced. “They're your uncle's eyes. Prince Osreth Blessedborn. King, now, I suppose.”

“How do you...” I didn't even have to ask the question before the awful truth dawned on me.

“My uncle came to you.” Osreth had been there. Maybe he had hovered in the very spot I was. That meant...

He had stolen *everything* from me. My parents. My crown. The life I was meant to have.

“He wanted enough, and so I granted his wish.”

Osreth had believed. He had made it past the sisythstras. He had found Witherton.

“He wanted to be King of the Sorcen Court.” Being a prince hadn't been enough for my uncle. Having love, a brother, a niece, a family—it just hadn't been enough.

“Osreth would have given anything,” the Wither said. And he had.

“He killed my mother.” I spoke as if in a daze. “He killed my father.”

Madness, everyone had said. Madness was my father's legacy, my mother's downfall. Madness had claimed the King, and that same madness would claim me.

“His price was paid. He gave me all.” The Wither lifted a

clawed fist, its fingers a raging storm of strings. “Now he is a king, and his heirs will rule the Sorcen Court forever.”

“*I am the heir,*” I countered, drifting closer to the Wither. “The Sorcen throne is mine by right of blood. I should rule Sorcen, not my traitor uncle. He would dare try to kill me for being the very thing he is.”

The Wither cackled again, appearing in the sky, its blank face inches from mine. “All you have to do is tell me what you *want*, Kingsdaughter.”

I could see my future. I sat on the throne, garbed in golden armour and a green cloak, my uncle’s tall, twisting crown perched on my head.

I ruled justly. I ruled kindly. I ruled because I was born to.

I was the *Kingsdaughter*. And a king’s daughter was born to be a queen.

I could have my court back. I could return to my old life. I could have my uncle dethroned and humiliated. Temptation made me open my mouth, almost made me speak.

*I want to be Queen of the Sorcen Court.*

I wanted *everything*. The world was within my reach, and I was going to take it. I wanted, I wanted...

From the corner of my eye, I saw Cohrven flutter his tattered wings.

Osreth had left Cohrven broken, bleeding, and dying. All because he had wanted more. All because so many years ago, he had been granted his greatest desire.

Osreth was going to murder me, just because I stood in the way of what he *wanted*. My father had stood in the way, and so had my mother, and so he had them removed. His path was cleared, and he had everything he ever wanted. *Everything*.

When would the hunger stop? For my uncle, it hadn’t. I didn’t think it ever would.

If I asked the Wither to make me a queen, then there would be no difference between Queen Allina Kingsdaughter and

King Osreth Blessedborn. He had stolen everything from me, and I would not be like him. I would not do the things he had done. I would not make the same horrible choices.

“You can do nothing for me.” I stared into the Wither’s blank face. And even though it had no eyes, it stared back. For one fraction of a heartbeat, I wondered if I would ever regret not taking its offer when I had the chance.

“Very well,” the Wither said. The moment disappeared.

I blinked, and the Wither was on the ground, inside the pristine circle. “Nightheart, when the sun rises in the morning, your wings shall be healed. They will be just as they were before Blessedborn had them torn to shreds.”

The Wither flickered out of our sight, but as we left, its cackling, grating voice echoed through the empty temple, laughing at something only it had found amusing.

# Thirty-eight

I WOKE AS the world began to shake, the horses whinnying frantically. My teeth clattered at the tremor, and I bit my tongue, cursing as blood pooled in my mouth. Loud cracks snapped through the air as shards of earth erupted from the rippling ground, stabbing upwards. I searched for Cohrven, ready to drag him to safety, but all I found was his empty pallet and discarded blanket.

I launched myself into the sky, avoiding the impact of the next tremors. Deeper, rhythmic thuds resounded throughout the clearing.

“Cohrven!” I shouted, but I couldn’t even hear my voice beyond the cascading earth. So, I flew.

The upheaval was not an act of nature, or a punishment of the gods. It was Cohrven, just like it had been in Suntrul, when he had been captured. And I had to stop him before his destruction spread further.

I flew breathlessly, desperate to find him. Soon, a gaping, jagged hole in the ground appeared, dirt still pouring into its depths. Rudimentary stairs led into the darkness, cleaved from thick stone slabs broken off the solid rock of the cavern walls.

Cohrven had carved his way to the Wither.

Another thud sounded, shaking the stone stairs. The ground shifted with the blow, a waterfall of earth tumbling into the once-forgotten cavern. Terror closing my throat, I flew into the depths below.

Witherton appeared soon, illuminated by the orange morning sunlight beaming through the cracks opening above. Cohrven’s swords glinted on the steps to the Wither’s temple, and I flew above him just as he entered through the arches.

“Show yourself!” he shouted, collapsing the walls to the temple in a cloud of dust and a spray of glass, the piles of shattered stone marring the pristine white circle from which

the Wither would appear. “You have not honoured our deal!”

His wings flared open, still torn. They hadn't been healed in the morning, as the Wither had promised.

The Wither's grating laughter encompassed us from all directions as it flashed into existence, its strings writhing, the strands almost bulging from its corporeal form. “I promised that your wings would become as they once were *in the morning*, Nightheart. I did not say which morning.”

Cohrven hadn't been specific enough with his wish. All that we had done. All that Cohrven had given to the Wither. It had been for nothing.

The air pulsed, plumes of dust rising from the floor as Cohrven fell to his knees, clutching his head in his hands.

He spoke through gritted teeth, as if he was trying to tame his anger. “Which morning, then?”

“I do not know. Once my power has been released, it cannot be controlled. You, of all fae, should understand that, Nightheart.”

Cohrven's answering scream wasn't of rage, but of deep anguish and unfathomable loss. For all he knew, he would never fly again. Would never again touch the sky. Would never again hover above the clouds as torrential rain poured below. Would never again be alone, blanketed by the stars and guided by the moon. Would never again reach for the blood-red sun as it rose on the horizon. His only hope had been destroyed.

I landed in front of Cohrven, facing the Wither with a growl, showing my teeth. “Leave us.”

To my surprise, it did, vanishing without even a cackle.

Cohrven shifted, his hands falling to his lap as he looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes. “This is my mistake,” he rasped. “Noranin was right. I have given to the Wither and received nothing in return. And I don't even know what I have given.”

I had expected uncontrollable fury. I had expected him to crush Wither-ton to dust. I hadn't expected quiet resignation.

“That doesn't matter.” I held my hand out to him. “None of

this matters anymore.”

The Wither had fooled us. There was no way to change the manifestation of its power. And though I didn't trust the Wither, it had not lied.

Cohrven grasped my hand, his fingers cold and his grip gentle. Before I could help him stand, he lifted himself onto one knee, to kneel before me with his head bowed.

“I'm angry with myself. I'm sad that I may never fly again. Right now, I feel nothing and everything, and I'm not sure if I wanted to be consumed by my feelings or absent of them. But above all else, I'm scared. And I'm not used to feeling scared.”

His fingers trembled, and he clenched my hand tighter to stop their quivering. “I'm scared that I cannot give you what I have promised. I'm scared that my power, my influence, will be diminished when I return to court. I'm scared that I will not be able to protect Val. I'm scared that you'll leave, now that you have no reason to help me any longer.”

He tilted his head to look up at me, finally. “Princess Allina Kingsdaughter, you have saved my life and my sanity, and I have never thanked you.”

“Cohrven...”

“Thank you, Allina. I owe you my life; I owe you my soul. I promise that I will do everything in my power to stop my father from going to war with the Sorcen Court. As of this moment, you are a subject of Liral, and will be respected as such by any whose path you cross.”

Taking a shaky breath, he continued. “And I would be *honoured* if you were to stay at Sky's End.”

I didn't miss his true meaning—that he wanted me to stay with *him*. Prince Cohrven Nightheart was on his knees for me, the closest he could come to begging me to stay.

I tugged his hand, squeezing his callused fingers and prompting him to stand. He towered over me, his chest inches from mine as he looked down, waiting for my answer, his brow creased with worry.

“I saved you because I couldn’t let you suffer any longer.” I had never told him. I had never thought to tell him. “You fought so hard. I couldn’t leave you. I couldn’t let you die, especially not at the hands of my coward uncle. I would save you again. I *will* save you as many times as I need to.”

I had betrayed my uncle. I had killed fae loyal to my family. I was a traitor, and I had done it all to become the saviour of a broken, dying prince.

And I would destroy *everything*. To the last mote of dust.

If I could save him, I would let the world run molten and drip through my clawed fingers, and I wouldn’t care.

“Hopefully not too many more times.” Though he tried to hide whatever emotions he was feeling behind levity, the thinnest cracks in his voice gave him away.

“I *will not* leave you.” I had made my decision before we had even found the Wither, before Cohrven had even chanced asking me. “Let’s go home.”

*Home.*

I had always known that’s what Sky’s End was going to become to me, even though I had tried so hard to resist.

Cohrven’s arms were around me before I had the chance to blink, one hand cradling the back of my head as he pulled it into his chest, the other wrapped around my waist. I tensed in shock, and he felt it, his grip loosening as he took a stuttered step backwards.

“I shouldn’t have—”

I dug my fingers into the leather of his armour and lunged forward, moulding myself to him, feeling his every hard line, revelling as he sagged in relief, burying his face in my hair. We breathed in time, the Wither, the sorrow, the anger forgotten as long as I was in his arms.

The Wither was our witness, but I didn’t care. It already knew everything we hadn’t admitted to ourselves.

In a languid, careful movement, Cohrven brought his hands to my face, his palms cradling my jaw, his fingers threaded



through my hair. He tilted my head upwards, and I couldn't escape the tenderness of his expression, the unshed tears glimmering in his eyes.

*He wanted me more than anything in the world.*

I closed my eyes, anticipating the soft press of his lips against mine. The next moment, his hands were gone.

He stepped back far enough that my fingers slipped from his armour. Separated from him, Witherton's damp aura of despair invaded me, setting me on edge as my comfort disappeared.

*Never again*, he had said at the inn, after I had warned him not to touch me. It seemed that he hadn't forgotten that vow.

He hadn't forgotten it last night, either, when the Wither had told me that he wanted me more than anything, and we had both dutifully pretended we hadn't heard anything.

I reached for him, ready to cast away my pride, to cast away everything that made me reluctant. But he was already walking away, back towards his makeshift stairs.

My scream of frustration stuck in my throat as my fingers curled into fists. I just had to call to him. I just had to say his name. Why was it so difficult?

The Wither answered my question for me, its voice echoing through my head only: "You've always been afraid to want anything, Kingsdaughter. You've always been so afraid of not being wanted in return, even when it is so clear. If not, you would be wearing a crown instead of standing here."

*How can I stop being afraid?*

"Ask me for what you want most in the world."

He was walking away from me, shoulders tall, stride powerful, and he hadn't even bothered to look back.

"He can sense where you are at all times. He does not look, but he always knows."

*Get out of my head.*

I flew, before the Wither could burrow into my mind even further. Leaving Cohrven to journey up the stairs, I

disappeared into the sky, clearing my mind and becoming nothing for a short time as the weak sun bathed the clouds in hazy orange light. Soon, though, I grew restless, Cohrven at the forefront of my thoughts. The sky no longer soothed me like it had in Sorcen.

Cohrven was saddling his horse with his back to me. Even without trying, he was an imposing presence, working with practiced efficiency as he tightened the straps and adjusted the reins. I could have ignored him, and we could have ridden home like nothing had changed, like the Wither hadn't said anything worth remembering. But I was done being afraid.

My heart pounded a frantic beat as I found the courage to stop pretending. "Cohrven, we never talked about what the Wither said you wanted most in the world."

He straightened, his hands curling into fists, then relaxing at his sides, before facing me with wariness. "You're stuck with me for the next couple of weeks until we reach Sky's End. I need you to not be disgusted by me for at least that long. So, *please*, do not start this now."

"I...I..." All of my confidence collapsed as I struggled to respond, as I understood his indifference. Why he hadn't acknowledged the Wither's confession. Why he hadn't tried to kiss me.

He didn't want to make me uncomfortable as I slept next to him every night, as I rode beside him every day. He didn't want to scare me at a time when I couldn't leave him, even if I wanted to.

"Fine," I conceded, trying to keep my shoulders from falling as I turned from him. If ignorance was what he needed from me, I would give him that.

I packed my rucksack as he saddled my horse, and, soon, we were tracing our path back through the trampled undergrowth—a reminder of how we had failed. The dark stain of the bog disappeared behind us, but the poem it owed its reputation to remained stark in my mind.

*The Wither always takes its price.*

# Thirty-nine

WHEN WE FINALLY reached Hjairn after weeks of slow travel, it was without pretence. Though Cohrven still hid his torn wings, I rode with him past the gates and through the winding streets, to confused stares and growing chatter.

“My parents will be entertaining court by judging disputes today.” Cohrven’s mood slipped into something sour as his brows drew in. “Everyone of any importance will be in the throne room with them, along with many of our subjects.”

“I know what I have to do.” Over the past three days, we had rehearsed my speech over and over again. Cohrven had pretended to be his father, challenging me on every point and putting up stubborn opposition.

“I’m a princess. I’ve been challenging a king my whole life. Your father won’t be any different.” I had already observed Heron, and I knew his weakness for his family. In front of the whole court, I would exploit it.

When we landed in the courtyard and dismounted, Val met us first. She slammed into Cohrven without slowing down, and he caught her with ease, drawing her into a tight hug as they both laughed.

“I’m so happy you’re back.” She looked between us both as she spoke, and I had to fight to keep tears from welling in my eyes.

Cohrven set her down, turning into a strict older brother. “Remember what you promised, Val. You can’t let anyone know that you’ve already met Allina.”

“I won’t,” she whispered in earnest, and bowed to me. “Greetings, Princess Allina.”

“Greeting, Princess Valarie.” I returned her bow as she repressed a giggle.

“Now, to meet my parents.” Cohrven nudged me in front of him, whispering again. “Enter first. It will create quite the

stir.”

I banished any nerves that were taking hold of me. This was the moment I had been waiting for, ever since Cohrven and I had made our deal in Noranin’s cramped bedroom. It was time for me to save my cousin and my court, to prevent the mindless bloodshed my uncle was willing to unleash all for the sake of his pride.

The guards opened the doors at our approach, first to the grand entrance hallway, and then to the throne room. Its brilliance made me pause. The entire room was set with the same black veined marble as the rest of the palace, with similar intricate carvings climbing up the walls in place of windows.

A large clump of fae-light was centred in the ceiling, mimicking the sun as it should have been, not as a muted yellow, but as a bright white that illuminated every marble column leading towards the elevated dais.

Glass covered the ceiling, holding back swirling water that scattered the light, no reflection the same as the room seemed to shift with its flow—a disconcerting illusion that required me to focus on where I was going.

The room was crowded with fae. King Heron and Queen Aehla sat on marble thrones of equal height on a dais at the back, wide steps leading up to their perch. Finely-dressed nobles stood close to the dais, and I assumed they would be scribbling notes on the scrolls in their hands if they weren’t staring at Cohrven and me as we walked down the aisle towards his parents.

Based on their plain dress, Cohrven’s subjects and lower nobility filled the closest half of the room, almost spilling out the door they were gathered so tightly together. As soon as they saw Cohrven, the crowd backed away from the aisle and towards the far walls, distancing themselves.

I hated them as they cowered. And I understood Val, her rage at those who feared Cohrven because of a truth that had been tainted. Cohrven didn’t pay them any heed, keeping his eyes locked forward, not because he didn’t want to

acknowledge his subjects, but because they didn't want to be acknowledged by him. His disregard was a gift, and he was aware.

Two subjects were standing in front of the dais, pleading their cases to their monarchs. At the sight of us, Heron waved his hand and they melted into the crowd. Heron stood at our approach, his crown of uneven shards of black crystal resting on his brow, complementing his dark attire, but Aehla stayed seated, hands gripping her armrests, sharp eyes scrutinizing me as a kylvre would its prey.

"Son." Heron clasped his hands together behind his back as we climbed the steps. "You have returned in good health."

Though his tone was cordial and his expression was disguised by the shifting light, the clench of his jaw made his annoyance clear. He had not been pleased at Cohrven's swift departure, and their last conversation had been an explosive argument. Of course, Cohrven had planned our return to coincide with when his father was in the presence of as many varying witnesses as possible, so that his father's displeasure wouldn't sabotage my proposal.

"I have, Your Majesty."

"And who is it you return with?" Heron's dark eyes joined Aehla's in skinning me to the bone.

"King Heron Shadowlark, Queen Aehla Lightwalker, may I present Princess Allina Kingsdaughter of the Sorcen Court."

I bowed as the room fell silent. Heron didn't look very kindly as he gaped, any suspicion overcome by astonishment. Aehla was the only one to retain her composure, her expression darkening into something frighteningly severe.

"I was kidnapped by King Osreth Blessedborn," Cohrven said, addressing not just his parents but everyone in the throne room. "I was beaten. I was tortured. I was sentenced to death, but before my execution the Kingsdaughter helped me escape. In retaliation, she has been branded a traitor by her uncle. I have granted her the promise of safety, but the life of a crown prince is worth far more."

Cohrven finished the first part of our rehearsed speech, then I stepped in to finish it. “Your Majesties, my uncle is readying for war. He provoked you by kidnapping and orchestrating what he had hoped would be the death of your son, and he taunts you as he amasses his army.

“I have but one request: Defend Liral, but do not retaliate against the Sorcen Court. The fae of Sorcen will not support a senseless war, no matter the slander my uncle has begun to spread about my actions. I...”

I paused as, for the first time, I really looked into Heron’s eyes. Up close, I didn’t see the emotion I had imagined would be there. They were frigid—like black ice. There was no gratitude for me, the fae who had saved his son from agony and death.

Heron had named Cohrven the *Nightheart*. He had used his son’s worst act for his own gain, and Cohrven still suffered from his decision. I wasn’t addressing a loving father—I was addressing a ruthless king. He would never agree to send Osreth running back to Sorcen with his tail between his legs after a lost war.

He would follow Osreth, and he would obliterate him. He would dispose of Erelie. He would claim the Sorcen Court as new Liral territory, and I would be left with nothing but a broken promise. Power was the only language Heron spoke. Fortunately, I could speak it too.

“When King Osreth Blessedborn attacks Liral, I will help you defeat him.” I raised my hand and large chunks of stone broke off the ceiling, water and debris raining down on the helpless crowd as they screamed. Fae ducked and covered their heads with their hands, but nothing hit them. When they looked up, the stone was whole again.

Heron peeked through his hands, straightening from a crouch as he stared at me in delight.

“And when you have captured the Sorcen Court, you will give it to *me*.”

I only hoped that Cohrven understood. My request was not

what we had practiced, but it was the only feasible option. If I ruled Sorcen, I could keep Erelie alive *and* I could keep Sorcen safe.

“The life of my son for a court,” Heron mused. He didn’t turn to Aehla, but her face was plain to read. *Anything for her son.* “You have made a worthy bargain, Kingsdaughter.” He raised his hands and looked over the crowd. “Welcome to the Liral Court. Sorcen shall be returned to you, along with Osreth’s head.”

Applause sounded through the room and I held back a shudder. Osreth had killed my parents with his greed. I should have wanted his head. But Erelie, how she would grieve... I couldn’t break her heart like Osreth had broken mine.

Following our interruption, the judging continued, but Aehla excused herself to escort me to my rooms, Cohrven taking her place, as reluctant as he was to leave me. With my spectacle accomplished, I should have been relaxed, but I was more nervous during our short flight down the hall than I had been speaking in front of the entire throne room. Thankfully, Val flitted along beside us, wearing a cheery smile.

“You’re the reason Cohrven left us so soon,” Aehla stated. Her sumptuous purple robes and long black hair rippled in the air behind her. Her crown was a thick gold band, a lone diamond centred on her forehead and encased with golden whorls. She reminded me of Ryena, in a way, with her conviction and strong love for her children, but there was something kinder about her face... and something colder.

“We split up when we reached the Bonebright Mountains,” I explained. “My uncle’s soldiers were hunting us, and our best chance was to force them to separate. Cohrven flew straight to Sky’s End and I fled to the coast. He met me at Jarnshill and escorted me back here, as I am no longer welcome in the Sorcen Court.”

The lie sounded quite convincing.

“Why did you help my son?” Placated by my response, Aehla dove straight into the question she had been waiting to ask.

“On Midsummer’s Eve, I overheard that my uncle was going to have me killed. During the celebrations, he revealed Cohrven as the main entertainment and—”

I remembered that Val was with us and stopped myself from going into greater detail. Cohrven never wanted Val to know what he had gone through during his capture, and I wouldn’t be the one to tell her. Her thin face had already fallen into despair.

“I used an illusion to help Cohrven escape the palace with me.” Telling the truth for once was freeing. “We were both victims of my uncle’s cruelty. I couldn’t leave him behind to suffer, because if I didn’t do something, he would have died in agony.”

I trailed off as a tear leaked down Aehla’s cheek, glistening against her pale skin. I had gone too far. Val was holding a hand to her mouth and breathing rapidly, like she was on the verge of panicking.

“You saved my son.” Aehla stopped, and we hovered midair. “Heron was wrong. Your court does not compare to the value of Cohrven’s life. He is worth so much more, but your request was wise. Anything you ask of me, I will give you.”

“I ask for nothing but your friendship, Queen Aehla.”

She laughed. “You know how to flatter me, Allina. My friendship you may have, along with my gratitude.”

“You have my friendship too,” Val added. I returned her bright smile.

We reached the door to one of the many guest rooms in the palace, a few floors down from Cohrven’s. Aehla bade me to rest and left to relieve Cohrven from his duties in the throne room.

Val lingered and I invited her in. The rooms were sumptuous, but sparse, with little furniture and no decorations beyond globes of fae-light illuminating the space. After washing my face and changing into a loose tunic and linen trousers, I left the bathing room and collapsed onto the sprawling bed. Val sat beside me, asking endless questions



about Cohrven and our journey. Satiated with my noncommittal, one-word answers, she soon started asking me about Sorcen.

“What does the Sun Palace look like? I’ve heard it glows.”

“It does, and I promise to tell you all about it another time.” I yawned and slumped back into the pillows. My eyes flickered closed, and before I could speak another word, I drifted off into a blissful slumber.

# Forty

BEFORE I COULD even see him in the dark, I sensed Cohrven's presence beside me.

"A mouse snuck in with you last night," he whispered, being careful not to wake Val. Her warmth burned against my wings as she snuggled into me.

"It's fine." I smiled as she grumbled in her sleep. "She reminds me so much of Erelie." We would stay over in each other's rooms at every chance. Much to Ryena's displeasure, we would stay up all night talking and sleep in far past what was expected of princesses. Osreth never minded, though. He was happy as long as we were.

"My father has called the War Council and he requests your presence at the meeting. Scouts returned yesterday and they've confirmed that Osreth is marching towards Liral, as predicted."

I bolted up, accidentally jostling Val.

My actions from yesterday finally sunk in. I hadn't only promised the destruction of my uncle, I had bargained for Sorcen if I helped orchestrate his defeat. It wasn't the time to tell Cohrven my new plan, not with a room of generals waiting for my advice. But after, I would take him aside and he would listen. Then I would end this war before either side had a chance to loose the first arrow.

"I suppose I must attend." I refuted my desire to not move by rolling out of bed.

Cohrven scooped a sleeping Val up into his arms. "I'll take Val back to her rooms and meet you back here shortly." A lamp flickered on, the light revealing that he was already dressed in all-black finery. For the first time since I'd met him, he was wearing a crown—a simple golden circlet, the only outstanding feature a band of dark stone set in the centre, running between rings of gold.

A stiff, high-collared black tunic edged with gold was tailored to the breadth of his shoulders, and a matching cloak fell to the heels of his black leather boots. Lying on a chair beside the bed was a similar outfit, and there was no else it would be meant for but me.

“Those are for you.” He gestured to the chair, confirming my suspicion. “Welcome to the War Council.”

The outfit was heavier than I expected. Though it wasn't noticeable at first glance, the tunic and trousers were lined with leather, to offer some protection should it be needed. The weight likely wouldn't affect my flight speed, but I would have to get used to it. After pulling on the finery, I chose to keep my hair down. The golden waves tumbling down my back were identical to the shade of gold accenting my clothes. I pulled the cloak up over my shoulders and fit the slits to my wings, then tied the strings tight and tucked them out of view underneath.

Lastly, I held a thick gold ring in my fingertips. The centre was indented with a swirling *L*. Putting on the ring would seal my involvement in the war and my allegiance to Liral.

My uncle would be my enemy. Erelie would be my enemy. All of Sorcen would no longer be my subjects, but my adversaries.

But what did it matter anymore? I had already made my choice the moment I freed Cohrven from my uncle's chains.

I slid the ring onto my finger, and it fit perfectly. Cohrven knocked on the door and I met him there.

“You look like a proper queen.”

I didn't miss the bitterness in his tone.

“We'll discuss that later.” I flew past him into the hallway. “For now, what does your father expect of me?”

“Insight into Osreth's army. His supporters. His numbers. His tactics. His supply routes. His temperament. Everything you know, essentially.”

“I can tell him most of that.” Cohrven bristled at my

complacency.

“What are you doing?” He gripped my wrist and pulled me to a gentle stop in the air. “I trust you, Allina, but you have to be honest with me. You’ve never wanted this war to happen, and you’ve never wanted Sorcen for yourself.”

“Maybe, after everything the Wither told me, I do. Would you have a problem with that, *Crown Prince*? The court I was meant to inherit was stolen from me. Now I have an opportunity to steal it back. If force is required, so be it.”

“As long as this is what you want, I will do everything in my power to make it so.”

“Will you follow me into this war?” Even though I had no intentions of seeing the war come to fruition, I still needed to know that he was with me.

His expression darkened into something menacing. “You’re not the only one who wants revenge.”

“Will you follow me anywhere?”

A second question, much vaguer, but he didn’t hesitate. “I would follow you into Helveda.”



WE ARRIVED AT the war room, but before we entered Cohrven grabbed my hand, bringing me to another stop. “I know you can handle my father and his generals, but don’t let them see any cracks. When you’re in that room, Sorcen isn’t your old home, it’s a battlefield.”

I nodded. He used his magic to swing the doors open and close them behind us. Four generals, all dressed in clothes identical to mine, stood around a rectangular stone table. At the first sight of Cohrven, they dipped their heads in a bow.

With a wave of his hand, Cohrven recognized the formality. Then their eyes were on me. Starting closest to us, Cohrven briefly introduced me to each general.

General Jain Highwater had long gray hair tied back in a

ponytail, brown skin, and dark eyes, her pupils indistinguishable from her black irises. She had served Cohrven's grandmother for over two hundred years before she died and her allegiance shifted to Heron. Out of all of them, she was the only one who bothered to give me some semblance of a smile.

General Trill Treesea was agitated. Her chestnut-brown hair was cut straight at her chin and her light skin was sunburned. She couldn't keep eye contact as she constantly folded and unfolded her wings, and her attention always seemed to be centred elsewhere, even when she was talking directly to someone. Without her honesty, I would have never guessed what everyone in the room was thinking.

"I'll trust the Madkingsdaughter when she gives us a reason to," she told Cohrven.

I gaped. Testing Cohrven's ire was a risky venture. Or so I had thought.

Before Cohrven could snap back, she continued, "Princess, you're bold, but that doesn't mean a thing to me until you can prove your claims. Impress us today."

"I will." She only made me more determined. None of them had any idea of what I'd been through, of what I had sacrificed to be there. Cohrven did, though, and his composure weakened with every introduction.

When no one was looking I touched his arm and prompted him to make eye contact. I shook my head discreetly. He huffed and relaxed his shoulders, indicating that my message was received.

General Aric Stoneweather was dressed in full black and gold armour, his square head shaved and his jaw covered with stubble. He was almost as tall as Cohrven, but not quite. A short nod was all I received from him.

General Oak Skysinger could have been an older version of my uncle. His hair and beard, though coloured in shades of gray, were cut in the same style, his eyes green, but not as green as mine. I rushed through my introduction, his

appearance making my stomach uneasy.

My seat was in the middle of the table, in front of a scaled-down map of the Sorcen and Liral Courts. Trying not show any weakness, I gazed longingly at the mountains and forests I had known and loved my whole life.

The Sun Palace was a white dot in the centre of Sorcen. Yellow pawns were concentrated about fifty miles south, with varying sizes of groups of pawns scattered across the board, converging on multiple destinations—the connections from Sorcen to Liral. If I hadn't known about my father's creations, their positioning would have appeared random.

I memorized the location of the highest concentration of pawns under the guise of hard scrutiny. If my uncle's lords were still en route, then he wouldn't start marching for another week at least. Cohrven wasn't going to like it, but I had to leave tomorrow.

Heron arrived in a flurry of wings, causing any conversation to cease. The occupants bowed and he acknowledged them as he flew to the head of the table and stood beside Cohrven.

“Good morning.” Heron raised his arms in greeting. “Today, we hear what the Kingsdaughter can tell us of the Sorcen Court. Unfortunately, General Ferris, our last contact in the Sun Palace, has gone silent. I can only assume the worst. But with his loss, we have gained an ally.”

*General Ferris was a Liral spy.* I remembered his ruddy face as he spoke to Osreth in the hall, asking him about my fate. Osreth seemed to have trusted him, but his growing paranoia may have finally served him well.

Heron turned everyone's attention to me. “Kingsdaughter, you displayed powerful magic in the throne room. Dare I ask you to repeat it?”

I didn't blink as Osreth appeared at Heron's side, haggard and tall, wearing his twisting crown. “I will do it myself if needed,” he said, as I recalled how I had learned that I was sentenced to death. Cohrven was used to my surprises, but the rest of the room evidently wasn't. Heron even drew his sword.

He disappeared and everyone startled. General Trill gasped.

“As long as your soldiers remain in Liral territory, I can hide armies.” I spread my hands across the map, making the pawns disappear to their eyes. “I can *make* armies.” The pawns reappeared, but tenfold across the map. “I can make mountains and monsters, real to the eye but not to the touch.”

“What’s Osreth’s biggest advantage?” Heron asked. “What does he think will turn the tides of this war to his favour?”

I smiled. “My Aunt Ryena isn’t only called Starfall for the colour of her hair. She can call stars from the sky and bring them down on your heads. She can crush a city and cause an earthquake, but she is limited. Her range is narrow, the effort exhausts her, and she won’t be able to recover for months. I expect that Osreth is counting on the devastation from her initial onslaught.”

Stunned into silence, no one responded when I paused for comments. “We have two options to contend with Ryena,” I continued. “The first is that Cohrven stops the stars from falling, no matter which territory we’re in. The second is that I create an illusory army far from where the actual army is, and let Ryena call the stars. There will be no damage done, and none of our soldiers will be affected. This would only work if we were in the Liral Court. Either way, she’ll exhaust herself for nothing.”

The silence broke into question after question. I tried my best to answer all of them, but the finer details escaped me. I couldn’t remember the number of soldiers my uncle’s smallest liege lords would provide, and I couldn’t pinpoint the exact supply routes that my uncle would choose, but scouts would be sent to uncover those details.

My last warning was about Osreth himself. “The trees speak to him, but his magic only works on the territory he controls. Any time a fae so much as steps into Sorcen, if the trees see, he will know. They take time to whisper to him, but they always do.”

“Then we burn them,” General Jain said. “Ash does not tell any tales, nor does it whisper in the ears of kings.”

I nodded, fighting down the nausea rising in me as I thought of the ancient Sorcen forests on fire. “Burning them is the only way to move freely.”

The table shook, lightly, like someone had bumped into it. Even though I was far from him, I could see Cohrven’s eyes flare. I willed him to stay silent, because I was going to explain everything soon. We had been in the room for most of the day, and everyone was visibly tiring. The meeting couldn’t go on for much longer

“Do you have any objections, Cohrven?” Heron said pointedly. He had felt the shake too.

“Why should we stop at the trees?” said Cohrven. “We should burn it all—every blade of grass. Even better, we should burn Osreth and his family at the stake. It’s only what he deserves.”

He was baiting me. “With all due respect, Your Highness, I want a court to rule at the end of this war, not a smoldering shell.”

“Of course,” he acknowledged. “A queen must have an intact court. Forgive my... *enthusiasm*.”

“It is forgiven.” I didn’t look at him, but I could feel the very air in the room vibrate with his frustration.

The meeting adjourned shortly after, and Cohrven almost vaulted over the table to get to me. He rushed us through the doors as I hid both of us under an illusion.

I didn’t need half the palace to witness our upcoming argument.

“Burn it down.” He gave a bitter laugh. “You’ve been trying to save Sorcen, and as soon as you have the chance to own it, nothing matters anymore? What are you playing at, Allina? I would love to know.”

I grit my teeth. “I’m *lying*, Cohrven. And if you could listen to me for one moment, then you’ll know the truth.”

He spread his arms wide. “I’m listening.”

“Your father won’t spare Sorcen, even if you convince the



whole War Council otherwise. He's just like Osreth. He's salivating for power, and you know it. The only way I can save my court and my family is if he gives the remnants of Sorcen to *me*."

Dipping his head in acknowledgement, Cohrven fluttered closer to me. "Explain the burning."

"The map gave me all the information I need. Now I know where Osreth is located."

"Why does that matter?"

"Liral is not going to war with Sorcen. My uncle's army won't even cross over." Cohrven furrowed his brow in skepticism, and I continued. "I'm going to find him first, and I'm going to *convince* him this war is a bad idea."

"The trees will see us through your illusions. You'll never be able to sneak up on his camp."

"I'll fly fast, and I'll hide above the clouds. He's less than a day's flight from the Crossover. I'll wear a Liral scout uniform, just in case."

He nodded, acquiescing that my plan was plausible. "It's extremely dangerous for you to infiltrate his war camp alone. Your illusions are an advantage, but you won't be able to hide from Osreth for long."

"I'll arrive at night, while he's asleep. The trees will barely be able to see anything, never mind communicate with him. After I *convince* him to stop the war, he won't be so eager to chase me back to Liral."

"Have you decided on the method of your *convincing*?" His smile was sinister. I didn't try to imagine the pain he would inflict upon Osreth given the chance.

"Not yet, but you'll get retribution. So will I." My dagger hung heavy at my hip as I pictured carving his wings, decorating them with ragged holes.

Osreth wanted my life. I wanted his flight. The bargain wasn't fair, but I would *not* lower myself by mimicking Osreth's cruelty and taking him from Erelie.

Cohrven sighed and looked back at the door, where the other generals were still filtering out, oblivious to our conversation. “I wish I could go with you, but since I can’t, can you at least let me talk you into taking a couple of my most trusted soldiers?”

“Cohrven?” Heron’s voice boomed from the meeting room and Cohrven rolled his eyes.

“We’ll discuss it this evening,” Cohrven promised, striding back to his father as I banished my illusion.

# Forty-one

NIGHT HAD FALLEN when I returned to my bedroom. I removed my cloak and sat in front of the mirror, running a brush through my long hair absentmindedly as I waited for Cohrven. He had promised to bring me the scout uniform, an assortment of weapons, and suggestions for bodyguards, so that I could leave in the morning. Closing my eyes, I enjoyed the silence until I felt a slight brush of wind against my arm.

I dove to the right and a dagger narrowly missed plunging into the middle of my back. Instead, the blade sunk through the flesh of my shoulder to the bone. I roared at the pain. Twisting my body and tearing the dagger from my attacker's hand, I faced the fae hovering in front of me.

He was slim, his facial features unknown to me underneath the shadow of a dark hood. My heart battered my ribs, any confusion giving way to my desire to survive.

“Help!” I screamed. Cohrven burst through the door. The assassin was distracted just long enough for me to grab my heavy silver hair brush and smash it against his temple. It hit right—too right. The assassin crumpled, and I doubted he would ever rise again.

I banished my illusion of Cohrven and cried at the pain arcing through my shoulder, the deep wound causing spasms in the rest of my arm. I pulled the dagger free and tucked it into my trousers. After grabbing a cloth and pressing it hard against my shoulder, I flew out of my room and down the hallway, my vision blurring with agony.

I needed to find Cohrven, and he would probably be with his father. I flew to the throne room, barrelling through everything and everyone in my way.

I landed and busted one of the doors open with my good shoulder and a pained cry, interrupting Cohrven and Heron's conversation as they stood on the dais. They were both stunned into stillness at my abrupt entry, the door swinging

shut with a loud clunk and the echo of my uneven footsteps breaking their silence.

“Cohrven!” I stumbled towards him. Blood streamed from my shoulder down my arm in rivulets, ending its journey by dripping onto the marble in heavy splatters.

“Allina!” Cohrven’s voice cracked in astonishment. “What happened?”

Cohrven rushed towards me, but Heron was closer. He caught me with one arm as I collapsed, holding me on my feet with a bewildered expression.

“There was someone in my rooms,” I gasped, taking fast, shallow breaths as my vision darkened around the edges. “He stabbed me and I—”

“No!” Cohrven shouted in a desperate panic, the sound crashing through the room.

I couldn’t move my head to look at him. I couldn’t even speak. And I didn’t understand why Cohrven had used his magic on me.

“Let her go!” Cohrven shouted again. And I broke his hold just enough to turn my head.

The fear on Cohrven’s strained face was terrifying. If he feared anything, I was wise to fear it as well, but he wasn’t looking at me, or anything beyond me... he was looking at his father, with one hand reaching towards us as if he was trying to stop something.

Then I felt the wetness blooming across my shirt, welling from my side, and the painful prick of metal—almost unnoticeable, but still there.

I couldn’t see it, but I knew the dagger was in Heron’s hand, his attempted strike so cleverly concealed behind our bodies as he had turned to hold me. It would have been a fatal wound, one that could have been blamed on the assassin. It was a wonder that Cohrven had even noticed it.

Heron wasn’t moving either—didn’t seem capable of it—and I came to a sick realization.

*Let her go.*

Cohrven didn't have hold of me—his father did.

And Cohrven had frozen his father just before he had the chance to gut me with his dagger.

“Why?” Cohrven yelled, his face twisted in pain.

“I want this war, Cohrven. I want the Sorcen Court.” Heron, at least, was capable of speech. My mouth seemed to be sewn shut. “My blood is calling for it, and Osreth has given us the perfect opportunity. You should be hungry for battle, but you are not. The Kingsdaughter has made you weak, and so she must be removed. You are my most powerful weapon, not *her*.”

“I will never let you hurt her.” With all his might, he was trying to hold his father still, but I could feel Heron shaking as he fought just as hard to escape Cohrven's hold.

“What is she to an entire court?” Heron scoffed.

“*Everything*. You've taken enough from me.”

“What could I have possibly taken from you?” Heron sounded incredulous.

“My name.” The water above sloshed with the tremor of the room, casting light in nauseating patterns across all of us.

Heron laughed humourlessly. “You'd rather have your old name? Where's the glory in that?”

“There is no glory in being called Nightheart. There never was. Why don't you say my real name? Or is that too shameful?”

“You want the truth? I can't even remember your old name.” Heron bared his teeth in aggression. “That's how insignificant it was. You're the stronger son, Cohrven. Act like it instead of whining about the past.”

“Don't you dare bring up Ehren now.” Cohrven's hands began to tremble as he fought his father for control.

“Why not? You were ruthless enough to win that battle. Stay ruthless enough to win more.”

The dagger slid deeper into my side as Cohrven's anger caused him to lose focus.

"I never wanted to win. I never wanted there to be a battle in the first place."

"Liar!" Heron yelled, the sharp word almost a physical blow. "Ehren was frothing at the mouth and you *put him down*. You made sure he would never hurt anyone ever again. I wasn't brave enough to do it, but you were. I respect you for it. I *love* you for it."

"*I hate you!*" Cohrven roared, and it seemed to shatter the very air. With all the strength in me, I pushed myself back against Heron's hold, and his control snapped.

I crashed to the floor as Heron was flung from me by the competing strength of his and Cohrven's magic. Heron stumbled, then fell backwards, his wings unable to catch him in time.

The back of his neck hit the edge of the first of the steps leading up to the dais with a loud crunch. Then I couldn't see any more because Cohrven was in front of me, lifting my shirt to heal the stab wound on my side, then the deeper wound on my shoulder, with quick efficiency.

I peered beneath his arm to Heron's prone body. "Cohrven... he's not moving."

"I know." Sadness crept into his voice, but he masked it behind determination. "You have to go *now*. Stop your uncle. End this war before it begins. The Crossover is a half day's flight. Val will show you the way."

"But... your father..."

"Let me take care of this."

"I will," I conceded, placing my hand over his heart and feeling its erratic beating. "I'm so sorry."

"None of this was your fault." He squeezed my hand in reassurance before returning it to my lap. "Go."

# Forty-two

THANKFULLY, VAL WAS in her rooms. I barged through her door and she dropped the watering can she was holding, flooding the floor by her feet.

“You have to take me to the Crossover, now.”

It wasn't a question. Without hesitation, she nodded and flew to pull on her boots.

Her curious gaze made guilt rise in my chest, but I wasn't going to mention Heron's death to her. It wasn't my place to let her know she had lost her father. And I certainly wasn't going to be the one to tell her that I was the reason he was dead.

Cohrven would bear the brunt of the fallout. No matter what statement the palace released, King Cohrven Nightheart would be forever known as the killer of his kin.

He would be a king far too early, of fae who despised him before he had the chance to win their trust. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do besides stop my uncle.

So, I flew.

Though Val never asked for the reason, she accepted my urgency. We didn't even speak, all of our effort saved for flying as fast as possible. The phantom wounds in my stomach and shoulder stung, even though they had been healed, the torn flesh mended with not even a scar left behind. I was glad Val hadn't seen the wounds, that she could remain ignorant for a little longer.

The Crossover lay deep in the western plains of Liral, the land uneven with smoothed-over craters formed by Aurric and Kaltianen's battle, if Cohrven was to be believed. A squad of soldiers were camped in the vicinity, standing guard in case Osreth sent scouts ahead. Two tall obsidian columns jutted from the otherwise-sparse expanse, a shimmering wall, fluid like water, connecting them.

We landed in a rush of wind, and Val took a deep breath after waving off the startled soldiers. “If you were to try and enter Sorcen while the Crossover looks like this,” she said, “you would die the moment you touched it. Once you gather enough magic, the wall will turn flat and stationary.”

As she spoke, she gathered magic and the wall solidified, exactly how she had described it would.

Before I could walk through, her small hand grasped mine. “I don’t know why you’re leaving, but please come back.”

“I promise I will.” I blinked back tears. “And you have to know, that I am so sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“As soon as I leave, you have to fly back to Sky’s End and find Cohrven right away. Promise me.”

“I promise.” Her uncertain whisper broke my heart.

I let go of her hand and entered the Crossover.

The sun was blinding. I winced and slammed my eyes shut, waiting for them to adjust.

Of course it was high noon. I couldn’t have guessed the time of day in Sorcen when I was in the Liral Court—where the orange sun always lingered on the horizon.

I squinted, seeing that I was high above the forest, on a quartz mountain that reflected the sun in astonishing fury. Purposefully, I assumed, to disable the Liral fae strong enough to use the Crossover if they happened to do so during the day.

Having the Sorcen forest laid out in front of me, feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin, made me smile, if only for a moment. My heart filled with fondness, until I remembered why Sorcen was no longer my home. Princess Allina Kingsdaughter was only a traitor who didn’t belong. The only use I had any longer was for my head to decorate a pretty plate beside Osreth’s throne.

Above the Crossover, a silver willow towered fifty feet into the air, its leaves chiming in the wind, its roots large enough to reach down the mountain, to the forest, to the trees... to



Osreth. My sorrow turned into frenzied panic.

It saw me. I had to fly, and I couldn't stop, or else the trees would whisper to Osreth before I reached him.

And if he knew I was in Sorcen, my entire plan would fail.

I leapt from the cliff, gathering speed as I fell, and opened my wings halfway down my descent. A scattering of clouds drifted across the sky, and I flew above them, flapping my wings as hard and fast as I could. I had to become the wind if I was going to reach Osreth in time, even if I exhausted myself.

I was no match for Osreth's physical strength, but once I had him cornered, my illusions would hide us from everyone else. No one would see his struggle. No one would hear his screams.

He would know helplessness—I would brand him with it.

I tried to stay strong, but as the sun dipped on the horizon and I neared the war camp, all the blustering confidence I had faked was vanishing. I still carried rage with me, and it would always be there, but thinking about Osreth *hurt*. He had killed my parents by going to the Wither. He had wanted to be a king more than he had loved them—more than he had loved *me*.

Though he wore a crown, he was a selfish coward.

But he was *my uncle*. He taught me how to fly. I couldn't forget his patience. His laughter when I could only flap one wing and I careened around the room, out of control. He caught me before I smashed into a wall, and patted me on the head, telling me that I'd master it next time.

And I had, just to make him proud.

That was why I did anything—so that he would take notice. I wanted him to see me as his second daughter. I wanted him to love me.

If that had been weakness, then I was weak. I couldn't let myself be weak any longer. Not when I was going to risk my life by confronting him.



NIGHT HAD FALLEN and my wings were heavy with exertion by the time I reached the war camp, but I couldn't afford to slow down. With each gust of wind at my back I could hear the trees whispering to each other, their leaves rustling, complicit in my ruin.

Soon, I hovered above a large clearing dotted with sprawling tents, with rows of crackling fires fending off the suffocating darkness. Sentries flew by me, making regular rounds in the air and on foot. If I was visible, I wouldn't have made it anywhere near the camp.

Osreth's tent wasn't difficult to find. It was the largest one, with makeshift rooms branching off the main structure, surrounded by soldiers and torches. The moon hung over the clearing, its muted light shining through the clouds, meaning that midnight was close and Osreth was asleep.

Unheard and unseen by the soldiers guarding the tent, I landed and slipped through the curtained doorway of Osreth's tent. His study had been set up in the main body of the structure, a dim ball of fae-light hovering above his desk, the wooden surface strewn with maps and letters. As expected, potted trees were placed in every corner, always watching, always listening.

I started with the trees in the study. They were small enough to pile in the dining room to the right, already blocked from sight by a thick curtain. I snapped their branches, hoping the pain would prevent them from focusing on me.

I crept into the bedroom, relieved to find that Osreth was asleep on his canopy bed, and alone. I had gambled on my hope that Ryena would stay with Erelie until she was needed at the front to unleash her stars. Even in his sleep, Osreth was strained, his forehead carved with deep wrinkles, his lips downturned in a scowl as he breathed heavily.

After dragging the rest of his trees into the dining room, I stood by the side of his bed with my dagger out. I could have

ended the war with one strike.

Instead, I slapped him.

He woke up gasping for air, springing into a seated position as he clutched his cheek.

“How dare y—” He began to shout, glowing light snaking through the veins of his neck, but I quenched his rage when I removed my hood, letting my golden hair tumble free. He blinked the sleep from his eyes, mouth open in astonishment.

“Allina,” he whispered tenderly. I almost let my lower lip tremble—let tears gather in my eyes.

“You killed my parents.” Burying my despair, I raised my dagger and pointed it at his chest. “You sought the Wither. You asked to be a king. And so, you were.”

“I never did any such thing.” He scrambled to his knees on the bed, stumbling over his long, green robe. “My *dear* brother went mad, and in his madness took his own life and that of your beloved mother. I would *never* lie to you.”

The tent faded and the Wither appeared beside Osreth, causing him to scream. I immersed Osreth in my conversation with the Wither while he stared in horror... and shame. He closed his eyes and covered his ears with his hands until the voices ceased and he knew it was over.

“I never meant to.” He spoke so fast I could barely understand him. “I didn’t want him to die. I didn’t know what the Wither would do.”

“You killed my parents with your greed!” I seethed, my face twisted with unleashed anger. “There was a price, and you knew it, and still you asked. How else were you going to become King of the Sorcen Court?”

“I thought he would abdicate,” Osreth blubbered. “I never thought... my brother... I didn’t want it that way.”

“Their lives—my life—were destroyed because of *you*.”

“No!” he shouted. “Your mother’s fate was all her own.”

“Liar!”

“The Wither is chaos bound by order—it has rules. The life of my brother was my price. The life of your mother was her own.”

I chose to listen to him. “What do you mean?”

“Who do you think told me how to find the Wither?”

I took a deep breath and rotated my dagger, fae-light glinting off the edge. “If you’re suggesting that my mother helped you...”

He shook his head violently. “I lied, of course. I told her Ryena was barren, and we wanted a child. She sympathized and told me her secret. The price was a lie, she said, to ward off fools. A very long time ago, your grandmother was on her deathbed, so your mother went and asked the Wither to make her well again. As promised, your grandmother was healed and the price had never been paid—or so she thought.”

“The price was the love of her life taking a dagger to her throat,” I guessed.

Osreth nodded sombrely. “The Wither *always* takes its price.”

“The Wither didn’t make you try to kill me. That choice was yours alone.”

“I don’t want to kill you.” He opened his arms, as if inviting me into an embrace. “I love you, Allina.”

“You don’t love me,” I snarled, making him recoil. “If you loved me, you would have made sacrifices for me. You would have fought for me. Your pride would never have been more important than *my life!*”

Cohrven’s words had taken root inside me—had grown, flowered. I deserved real love—not Osreth’s manipulative, fake version.

“I hate you,” I screamed. “You ordered your guards to kill me. You had them hunt me like I was a rabid animal. You didn’t care if I died.”

“You are rabid when you’re with *him.*”

I ignored his interruption, the blatant sneer. “I can only imagine the lies you told Erelie. She must despise me now.”

“Erelie saw, by the waterfall.” Osreth’s face turned haggard. “The guards barely caught her in time. She flew through the halls, screaming about what I had done to you. She’s not allowed to leave her room, and she won’t see me. So, believe me, Allina, if there’s anyone she hates, it isn’t you.”

I could have cried in relief. Erelie knew. She didn’t hate me, and she had tried to protect me. She was still my little cousin.

“Is that all you want, Allina? To berate me for my many mistakes?” He made to stand, but I shook my head and he settled back onto his knees. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” I stepped to the side as Cohrven emerged from the shadows. “But you will be.”

Before Osreth’s face in that moment, I had never truly seen fear. I had thought I had seen it before, but it was nothing in comparison to the cowering child kneeling in front of me.

I didn’t make Cohrven’s illusion say anything. I didn’t need to, because Osreth knew the pain he had caused. He knew that when wings tore, the pain was excruciating. He knew the torture his guards had put Cohrven through, that he had encouraged.

Cohrven stared. And stared.

Osreth began grovelling.

“Please, have mercy.” Osreth crawled from his bed and prostrated himself on the floor. “I have a family. I have a daughter who loves me. I’m Allina’s uncle. *Please.*”

Cohrven lashed his boot out and kicked Osreth’s shoulder, knocking him to the ground. Osreth’s chest heaved as Cohrven stood with one foot planted on his stomach, his eyes wild, searching for a way out.

“Allina,” he croaked. “I’m truly sorry. I never—”

“Do not speak another word,” I ordered. He listened.

“This war is over. You will disband your army. You will say

you proposed a treaty with Liral, which was accepted. If you do not, then I will let Cohrven deal with you in any way he so wishes.”

Visibly, he shuddered. His face half-hidden by shadows, Cohrven smiled at Osreth’s fear.

“If you ever send so much as a sentry into Liral, I will let Cohrven have your head.”

He nodded fervently.

It was time to make my threat tangible. His green wings were splayed across the ground, beating in time with his thrumming fear. I looked at my dagger, then to them.

“No,” Osreth shouted, understanding, writhing under Cohrven’s boot. “You can’t. Don’t be me, Allina. Don—”

“It burns,” Cohrven said, emotion creeping into his low voice. “When they’re first torn, you feel like they’ve been set on fire—the agony was almost enough to make me faint. And they don’t stop burning—you can always feel them. When you look in the mirror and see them, and you know that you’ll never touch the sky again—that’s even worse than the burning.”

Crying, Osreth beat his fists against Cohrven’s boot. “No,” he babbled. “Not my wings!”

I brought the knife down. Osreth screeched.

But I stopped, the knife lingering in the air just above the delicate green membrane.

I couldn’t do it. Not because I didn’t want to, but because it was a pure declaration of war—two Liral subjects maiming the Sorcen King would only escalate the impending violence. A threat would suffice to keep Osreth in line.

“Continue this war, and I *will* slice your wings from your shoulders. Then Cohrven will remove your head. Call me a traitor, call me anything you wish, but do not bother me, or Liral, in any capacity from this day forward.”

He nodded, blinking his tears away. “I won’t. I won’t. I swear on Erelie’s life. I swear on my crown.”

“Remember this, Blessedborn,” Cohrven said. “Remember this moment. Remember how I did not kill you, and do not think it is because I am weak.”

Cohrven stepped off Osreth’s chest and kicked his ribs, the snap of bones breaking audible. Osreth yelped, clutching at his side.

Then he kicked Osreth again. And again.

Later, the trees would whisper and he would know that Cohrven had never been with me. That it had been me standing on his chest. Me breaking his ribs with my savage kicks. Maybe he would even hate me for it. I didn’t care.

“You should have loved Allina more,” Cohrven stated. Osreth shut his eyes and whimpered, curling into a ball and clutching his knees to his chest.

I felt loss when I walked away, acute and heavy, but I didn’t cry. I was beyond mourning what was already dead. What had *been* dead since I overheard Osreth discussing my fate with Ryena months ago.

“Wait, Allina,” Osreth pleaded. I almost chose not to, but I turned and saw him struggling to lift himself to his feet. He looked old and decrepit, a man defeated. That man wasn’t my uncle.

“Your father was looking for you,” he said, struggling to speak through the pain of his broken ribs.

“What do you me—” Bile rose in my stomach as I understood.

“I heard your mother’s screams. I flew as fast as I could, but I was too late. He had that bloody sword, and he was trying to get into your room—trying to get to *you*. There was nothing living in his eyes. Nothing of *him* left.”

We both knew what he was going to say next, but that didn’t stop him from speaking and making it real. As tears stung my eyes and streamed down my cheeks, he told me the truth: “I killed your father. My brother. My best friend. I killed him before he could kill you. He was my price.

“I do love you.” His watery green eyes met my identical ones. “You are my brother’s daughter, but you are also mine. I’ve always thought of you as mine.”

If he had told me so a few months ago, it would have been the happiest moment of my life. Instead, I felt nothing.

“Why did you want to kill me, then?”

“It would have broken my heart, but Aurricc’s orders are not to be questioned.”

The same excuse. Of course Osreth would blame Aurricc, especially when the outcome was so favourable to the preservation of his power.

“Thank you for saving my life,” I began, unable to stop myself from reminiscing. “I am grateful that you were my uncle. He taught me how to fly. He told me stories every night. He took care of me when no one else could.”

He almost looked... hopeful. How delusional.

“But he’s gone. When I look at you, I can’t even see him anymore.”

Without bothering to watch his face fall, I opened the curtain to leave his tent, and Cohrven’s illusion followed suit. “Take care of Erelie, or I *will* find you again. That I promise you, *Osreth*.”



# Forty-three

I STUMBLED THROUGH the Crossover, my magic finally depleted, my wings limp at my back. Before I could collapse to the ground, strong arms caught me.

“Allina!” Rian’s voice almost made me weep. He held me up, bracing my forearms as my legs quivered with the effort to stay standing. A few steps away, a carriage awaited, copper-haired horses neighing and stomping their hooves. “Praise Kaltianen, you made it back.”

I heaved in large breaths, trying to get enough air in my lungs to speak. “Cohrven...”

“It was announced that Heron’s death was a tragic accident,” Rian whispered, eying the soldiers surrounding us with apprehension. “The subjects of the Liral Court have heard the same proclamation before, but none have been brave enough to question Prince Cohrven Nightheart’s sudden rise to power. Even so, someone saw Heron’s broken neck and everyone’s talking... it’s like Ehren all over again, but worse.”

“It wasn’t his fault.” I was the only witness, the only one that could corroborate Cohrven’s story. “I swear to you.”

“I believed Cohrven when he told me, don’t worry.” Rian led me into the carriage hastily, practically carrying me as he helped me up the steps. I swaddled myself in a fur blanket, then curled on my side as Rian seated himself on the bench across from me and thumped the roof of the carriage with his fist, prompting the driver to begin our day-long journey.

“With the pending war, Cohrven has had to consolidate power fast. Aehla’s helping him with the transition. Heron’s funeral and internment was this morning. The coronation is tomorrow morning.”

“But I stopped the war.” I had left Osreth broken, crawling on his knees, crying like a child.

“We don’t know that yet. Until we see the Sorcen forces

disbanding, Cohrven's preparing to fight. He can still depend on the loyalty of the War Council."

Rian was right, but uneasiness knotted my stomach. What if I hadn't done enough to deter Osreth? What if I should have torn his wings to shreds in warning?

My entire frenzied flight may have been for nothing.

"Not if they think he murdered his father." I couldn't imagine any of them would approve of such a bloodthirsty act.

"They listened to him when they knew he murdered Ehren. This won't be much different. Though they are members of the War Council, their main purpose is to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Heron had become cruel, and desperate for conflict. Cohrven will be a more rational ruler, and they are well aware of that."

"I hope you're right."

Rian shrugged. "It helps that Cohrven's more powerful than all of them combined."

Cohrven would have to reign through fear. How else could he rule his subjects when they knew he was responsible for the deaths of his brother *and* his father? How could he change their minds, so that they could see him as benevolent?

"What is he doing now?"

"I'm not sure." Rian dragged his hand over his face, and I noticed the weariness in his furrowed forehead, his tired eyes. He had given up helping Cohrven to meet me at the Crossover. It must have been difficult for him to agree to Cohrven's request, knowing that he was leaving behind so much chaos.

"Thank you for coming here. I am in your debt."

He scoffed. "Let this debt offset mine. You risked your life to save Cohrven and spare the Liral Court a devastating war. Besides, Cohrven would never have let you return from the Crossover alone. If you hadn't made it back, he would have sent an army to rescue you. And he *will* be very cross with me if you arrive at Sky's End as exhausted as you are now."

I was almost offended, but I could feel the grime of dried

sweat on my face, and the strain as I struggled to keep my eyes open. “I *have* been flying for more than a day.”

“I know, so please get some rest.” Rian pulled the curtains framing the carriage windows closed, blocking out any light. The air grew warmer, making my eyelids heavy, and before I could respond, I was asleep.



I *NEEDED* TO see Cohrven. An overwhelming panic had taken over me the moment I had stepped from the carriage, fluttering my heart and agitating my breaths.

*Cohrven. Cohrven. Cohrven.*

I had left him so abruptly. It felt like I had been gone weeks, instead of one day. Pathetic as it was, I couldn't imagine being without him for much longer. I wanted to be near him, to feel his presence, to hear the deep timbre of his voice, to watch the grace of his gait, to witness the ferocity of his power.

I had to tell him about Osreth. I needed to tell him the Wither's price was real. I needed to know what had happened after Heron's death. I needed to know if Val didn't hate me, if Aehla didn't think it was my fault.

My unseen flight to his rooms ended with disappointment when I encountered the locked door. All my loud banging did nothing, so I flew to Val's rooms next. I couldn't build the courage to face her, though, and so the throne room was my next destination.

He *had* to be there.

When I passed General Jairn leaving through the tall doors, sadness clear in her downturned eyes and slow flight, I knew he was.

I caught a door before it closed, shouldering it to the side and dropping to the ground halfway to the dais. The semblance of a sun, usually shining bright, had been dimmed to melancholic red. Black banners of mourning hung from the walls, the largest one hanging directly behind the thrones.

Cohrven sat in the throne that had belonged to his father, bent over, his elbows supported by his knees, his fingers digging into his scalp and hiding his face. His black-and-gold circlet glimmered in the shifting light from above. Either whatever he and General Jain had discussed had been distressing, or he was just now able to be vulnerable, finally free from a constant audience.

I banished my illusion and cried, “Cohrven!”

He jolted, lifting his head and peering at me through his fingers before being overtaken by astonishment. I was already running, but he had descended the dais and crossed the floor before I could make it half the distance to him. He cradled my face with his hands, and I felt his magic pour into me, searching and soothing.

“You’re back.” The barest smile reached his lips. Dark circles and deep bags sat beneath his eyes, stark against his flat, pale skin, as if he hadn’t slept since I left. His hair was dishevelled, like he hadn’t stopped running his hands through it. Even so, he was dressed more regally than I had ever seen him, his stiff black clothes embroidered with gold whorls, a black cloak falling to his shining leather boots. Thick gold rings covered most of his fingers, the metal cold against my cheeks.

“I have so much to tell you.” I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch as my panic receded. I was with him. Everything was going to be fine.

“I wish we had time. The Cardinal Dukes are arriving soon, my Uncle Stratus of the East among them. I need to quell their curiosity, and very likely their anger, before my coronation.”

“I would have done so many things differently, Cohrven.” I looked up into his eyes, even as their dullness terrified me. “Your father, it was all my fault. I should have never asked him for Sorcen, I should have been more careful around him, I should have been weaker, more complacent—”

“No.” He interrupted me, unmistakable rage twisting his mouth as he snarled. “I loved my father, but I hated him so much more. I do not mourn him. I am not sorry for his death. I

am only sorry that he hurt you in his attempt to control me.”

His voice increased in volume, becoming almost... elated. “I’m *free*. I don’t live in fear of him any longer. I don’t have to hide my wings. I can keep my family safe. I can keep *you* safe.”

His magic dissipated, and his hands left with it.

“Don’t stop touching me.” I wasn’t ashamed to plead, not when all I wanted was to feel his hands on me again. I had waited long enough. His brows lifted minutely, but his expression soon darkened with hunger as he laced his fingers through my hair, taking care not to catch his rings in the strands.

“Be careful, Allina,” he rasped, as his thumb traced my bottom lip, “or I will give you *everything*.”

“I don’t want to be careful.”

Conviction brightened his pallid complexion, stoked the fire in his eyes until the dull glaze faded. “Tonight, come to—”

“Your Highness.” The doors to the throne room banged open, and General Trill charged in, her agitation apparent in the sporadic fluttering of her wings. “The Duke of the North has arrived.”

“*Fuck*.” Cohrven growled through gritted teeth, soft enough that only I heard. He dropped his hands and nodded, acknowledging Trill, then slipped a key into my palm. “Stay in my rooms tonight, until I can offer you equivalent protection elsewhere.”

I nodded in acquiescence. I didn’t want to appear too eager, but I was beyond grateful that I wouldn’t have to stay in the guest room where I had been attacked.

“And, now, I must appease the dukes.” Cohrven sighed, then straightened his weary posture before escorting me out of the throne room. Letting him go stung, the loss of his presence leaving me hollow.

Trill lingered behind, scrutinizing me. Up close, her eyes carried the same dark bags as Cohrven’s. “I hope you ended

your uncle's war, Kingsdaughter.”

I wished I had my earlier confidence. That I could have said the war was already over. But my prior certainty had fallen into doubtfulness, and all I could say was, “So do I.”

# Forty-four

AN ENDLESS AMOUNT of fae flew into Hjairn, their shadows passing in front of the sun, like moths swarming to light. Black banners snapped with heavy gusts of wind along the walls of Sky's End, reminding them that coronations were not supposed to be so swift.

Given the circumstances of Heron's death, Cohrven's rise to power had inspired curiosity, the grounds crowded with fae vying for a spot in throne room's audience. None of them could see me as I hovered above, hidden by an illusion.

I had woken up long before dawn and stared at the wall until the sun rose. I hadn't been able to go back to sleep. I hadn't been able to eat. I had barely been able to comb my hair, or dress in my neatly-pressed Arch Drakar attire.

Constant guilt churned my stomach, making me nauseous and light-headed. I needed to apologize to Val for keeping the truth of her father's death from her. I needed to apologize to Aehla for causing the death of her husband.

But, first, I had to find the courage to do so. I didn't know if I could face their anger, their despair, even if I deserved all of it.

I hadn't seen Cohrven since he had left me at the throne room. Earlier, I hadn't been able to keep myself from searching for him, but I had come up empty. The longer I went without seeing him, the more uncomfortable I became, though I knew that was foolishness.

He was probably fine, besides being sleep-deprived.

A loud crack fractured the air, turning all heads as the sound echoed. I flew towards the source, ahead of the rushing crowd. Before I could round the corner of Sky's End, an explosion rocked the earth, making me clamp my hands over my ears, its violence sending the fae standing below to their knees.

Above the cemetery, a thick cloud of dust had been flung

into the air. Tombstones had been toppled. Chunks of stone littered the grounds. *Plain, gray stone.*

Screaming began, as fae pointed to the sky.

The figure was a black silhouette against the burnt orange of the rising sun. Ragged, uneven holes punctured its wings, leaking light through, and frayed edges dragged wisps of membrane through the air. Flight should have been impossible, but the figure hovered in place, unmoving except for the steady beat of its wings.

I flinched as every window in Sky's End ruptured in a spray of glass, shattering the fearful silence as another chorus of screams tore from the gathering crowd. Rising sunlight glinted off countless glass shards, sending a rainbow of colours skittering across the tombstones. Cohrven emerged from Sky's End, flinging his arms forward and sending glass funnelling towards the dark figure.

Right before the shards punctured the figure, they erupted into a puff of sand and rained down upon the mausoleums, sparkling like the finest snowfall. Cohrven growled, and under his control, heavy chunks of scattered mausoleum stone cracked into smaller pieces and circled the figure, enclosing it in a whirlwind. The figure dismissed the threat with a wave of its hand, slamming the stone back to the ground.

It opened its arms wide, as if in greeting. Then it spoke, with a voice hoarse from disuse... a voice rotted by death: "You've grown, *little Cohr.*"



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